A WILFUL YOUNG WOMAN.

VOL. II.

A WILFUL YOUNG WOMAN

BY

A. PRICE

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'A RUSTIC MAID," "WHO IS SYLVIA?"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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A WILFUL YOUNG WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

FRESH FIELDS.

Despite her presumably regretable mission, Sydney's journey through that long June afternoon was the very reverse of sad.

The mere sensation of rapid transit was exhilarating. The sight of the broad Suffolk acres, their grassy wealth rippling like sea waves under every passing breeze, now shadowed by clouds, now gleaming out again under the glorious sunshine, seemed a mute harvest-song of grateful

earth, that found a silent echo in her own thankful breast.

Mrs. Dacie was not reported so very ill. Likely as not, calculated Sydney, knowing her well, her new malady was only a great restless home-sickness that could easily make prey of such a housemother as she, for close on forty years, had been.

If only this, then the magic of the gold stored away in Sydney's purse would soon furnish the medicine of speedy return. If by ill hap anything more serious impended, still the coming fulness of that same purse would surely be able to level some difficulties, smooth some cares away.

So, resolutely refusing the situation any very seamy side, but rather painting it with colours off the palette of her own bright present, Sydney sped along by homestead, village, field; past sleepy little

towns basking by riversides in hollows of the landscape: effected, by aid of a friendly porter, a most complicated change at such a junction of perplexing lines as would have driven the invalid, unescorted, clean demented: swept by a grand cathedral, with uprising lantern so stern and solemn that it for the moment awed the buoyancy of her spirit into something akin to prayer: and glided into mid-England, unwearied by miles or hours, having within her, plus recounted pleasures, a something secret, surpassing all; a mixed mystery of hope and expectation that sufficed to annihilate space and time for that one exciting day.

Those last glances of Rupert Villiers! His last words! What had they meant?

Why, one thing. One only. That, the message rarely heard unmoved.

All the journey's length his farewell

entreaty for her quick return followed her, ringing like music in her ears. For *her* to be so wanted back! For *her* to hold the power of adding to or taking from the happiness of this man's life! For *her* to have an unmistakeable assurance of what awaited the next day's meeting in his—'Then Sydney I shall ask for my reward!' Such a heralding was here of summons from the unfettered fields of girlhood into the happy bondage of woman's royal domain, that her whole nature trembled while it glowed at the prospect, and any attempt at calmly judging her own emotions was lost in the all but mystic new conditions that environed her.

The glow of afternoon was melting into evening when Sydney was set down at her destination. Stranded at the small station of the very rural town that, with quite respectable hills in the background and

stone-built dwellings in lieu of East Anglia's interminable brick and plaster, had half a foreign look, she found any arrival from St. Clairs so far unexpected that no one was at hand to meet her.

Cabs being luxuries unknown at Chaddeley unless by special command from the leading hostelry, she had first to inquire her way to the abode of Miss Thorne and Mrs. Carew, spinster and widow sisters of Mrs. Dacie, and then make her way thither afoot, independently carrying her own light impedimenta.

The long street traversed and the modestly well-to-do domicile looking out on its own croft from windows framed in ivy and monthly roses, discovered at last, Sydney's unannounced appearance on the trim pink-begirt lawn scared the good people, at whose bidding she had come, amazingly.

The trio were out of doors, rusticating in an arbour cut from a hedge of yew. Mrs. Carew, a plump elderly likeness of Mrs. Dacie, ensconced in a garden seat of many angles, was taking time by the fore-lock and knitting flaming scarlet comforters for next winter's service. Miss Thorne, larger, longer, more determined of aspect, sat bolt upright on a three-legged stool, reading monotonously the poetical effusions of a local genius, unobservant of the fact that the invalid sister for whom this intellectual treat was especially spread had fallen into a peaceful doze in her easy chair, under the soporific influence of drowsy rhymes and the buzzing of clouds of insects.

With the unlatching of the gate the two wakeful ladies were on the alert.

At sight of Sydney, travelling-bag in hand, both hastened forward, careful not

to rouse their sister, and offered a welcome mingled with confused surprise.

'My dear,' whispered Mrs. Carew, in her agitation trailing her knitting after her like a fiery serpent, 'how glad we are to see you! But we didn't expect you—I mean we never thought you could get here so soon. You see your dear mother—but —' stopping short as a smile played over the visitor's countenance, 'I—I—beg your pardon! I must be mistaken. *Is* it Mary? Mary Dacie?'

'Certainly not, Louisa,' interrupted Miss Thorne in peremptory undertone. 'How could you make such a blunder? Kindly excuse us,' apologising with dignity, 'we were rather expecting a young relative my sister had not seen for many years. But may I inquire who—or to what we are indebted——'

'I am only Mary Dacie's friend, Sydney

Alwyn,' was the straightforward reply to this embarrassed questioning. 'Perhaps you may have heard my name from Mrs. Dacie.' Both sisters set up an affirmative murmur. 'As Mary cannot leave her father very well I came instead of her, to take Mrs. Dacie back if she is able to go. But,' glancing toward the arbour, 'she does not look worse. Is she? We were frightened about her when your letter came.'

'Indeed, so were we when we sent it;' returned Miss Thorne very emphatically, 'but we never meant to upset them at St. Clairs. We are so vexed if we did. It is so good of you to come, Miss Alwyn. We do hope it has not inconvenienced you!'

'But we felt it our absolute duty to write,' said Mrs. Carew, when poor Mary Ellen had those dizzy attacks.'

'And seemed to pine after her husband's doctoring so extraordinarily,' put in the spinster.

'Which was only natural,' added the widow lady, 'but dizziness, Miss Alwyn, as our father, who was a physician forty years, used to say, dizziness may mean anything, from bile to apoplexy.'

'And we felt the responsibility so great we were forced to let them know the true state of the case!'

'Not that poor Mary Ellen actually asked us to write for her daughter, you understand, Miss Alwyn, only—'

Well 'only,' as Sydney could clearly gather from the explanatory duet they poured forth in lowered key for full five minutes, this timid feminine household had fussed and fumed itself into a violent state of alarm over its guest's condition, and had evidently jumped at the idea of getting

her safely back to her own home, though in the presence of this generous young stranger they felt a little bit ashamed of the course they had somewhat selfishly adopted. They were very voluble, though, in mutual exculpation, repeating over and over again how they would both 'do anything for dear Mary Ellen but—if anything were to happen!' and at that solemn juncture, 'Mary Ellen' woke up suddenly—woke up and added her quota of astonishment to Sydney's reception. Once assured however that no horrible calamity at St. Clairs had sent her young neighbour to her side, the invalid was so genuinely delighted at the sight of her that she most readily condoned the exaggerated fears which had fetched her thither.

'My dear,' confessed Mrs. Dacie, after the sisters had left them, with anxious injunctions to come in soon, for the sun

was going down; 'My dear, the very sound of your voice seems like part of my own people and makes me better; but do you know I was miserably shaky last week, and I think we all frightened one another! Being so little together for so many years you see we had forgotten each other's ways. They—' with a nod towards the house—'meant to be kindness itself, but except when I could induce Maria to read this young linendraper's poetry to me, she could talk of nothing but my symptoms, and seemed determined to make out I was going to have a fit! And poor Louisa, Mrs. Carew, my dear, was so particular over everything I ate and drank, that it was coming to my never relishing a thing at all. They—very thoughtfully, I'm sure, and quite at their own expense—brought a young doctor in to see me unexpectedly, and Sydney, it seemed so

dreadful to have anyone but my own husband asking me—questions—I was quite overcome. I expect it was then they wrote. To tell the truth I'm not sorry they did. If, dear child,' caressing Sydney's hand, 'it has not put you about too much making the journey for me!'

'And that it has not done the very least,' the girl hastened to answer. Here was someone else (blushing over that un-uttered 'else,') tender and kind to her. Notes of love seemed ringing like joy-bells about her to-day! 'If you like having me it is only just a summer excursion, and'—making light of what she had done—'as all the scenes are fresh to me it ought to give plenty to remember and profit by!'

Which words, afterwards recalled, were to sound like some elfish prophecy, their whole fulfilment hid for many a day in darkest cloud.

'Mary Ellen,' here cried Miss Thorne from her window. 'Our sister Louisa thinks there's going to be a dew!'

'Which means we must go in,' said Mrs. Dacie rising obediently. 'I transgressed one evening, it was so soft and warm, and I got sent to bed in disgrace, and was made to swallow some prevention posset that turned me queer for four-and-twenty hours! I am afraid we three old ladies have been three old worries to each other!'

And Sydney, though quite ready to deny the imputation as far as the speaker was concerned, was soon forced to admit its truth with respect to the others.

For her advent, in place of Mary's, had thrown each hostess into a trying ferment of hospitality. Arrangements that would amply have sufficied for an own niece were entirely inadequate to the reception

of a complete stranger, and such a stranger as their sister had represented this to be. Miss Alwyn, the liberal, well-dowered young lady from that very superior residence, The Dale, must see that Mary Ellen, though now unfortunately narrowed in her means, belonged to people who understood, and had means for, proper entertainment. So a flutter of hasty preparation pervaded the house as the pair from the garden entered. Much chinking of the best plate, unwrapped from rustling folds of tissue paper, was audible from one room. Miss Thorne, her every-day stuff gown exchanged for creaking brown silk, was caught surreptitiously polishing up the best silver tea-pot in another. A half-open door, closed by some unseen jerk, discovered Mrs. Carew, her cap-strings pinned back, presiding over the concoction of an omelette whose savoury

odours soon overpowered the pleasanter fragrance of monthly roses. One little serving-maid was sent racing off to the nearest farm for cream, 'which,' bouncing presently into the trim drawing-room, 'please mum, I couldn't get nohows,' she announced, ''cause it hadn't been spoke for overnight.' Another stumped to and fro the dining-room, visibly changing, with a cautious speed that evoked much laboured breathing, the crockery of the every-day supper-table for that precious best china service whose rare use was a deep anxiety to all concerned. With profuse regrets at there being no late dinner prepared, 'which could easily have been had we at all expected *you*, Miss Alwyn!' supper was proceeded with, sounds of rumbling and scuttling hither and thither overhead, meanwhile betokening action upstairs on the visitor's behalf. An

ominous tumble and a shrill squeal compelled Mrs. Carew, with a 'please excuse me,' to hurry aloft, to return however with the gratifying news it was only Susan had collapsed under a mattress.

'Our house is so small,' she explained, 'we have only one good-sized spare room. And that being west, you see dear Mary Ellen must have it.'

'With her tendencies, you understand,' said Miss Thorne, 'the morning sun on her asleep might have serious effects.'

'And of course we couldn't think of putting you in the little south room that would have done for Mary,' chirped the widow.

'So we have made the necessary changes, and put you in our east room; we can go anywhere!' said the spinster, with cheerful resignation. 'And do you like your head north or south, Miss Alwyn. Susan

and Betsy and my sister Louisa and I will lift the bed any way you choose, with pleasure.'

Any room and any bed and her head in any direction would equally have suited Sydney, but on that and a score other points she had to express an opinion before her fidgety hostesses would be content, and by the time she was allowed to go to rest she felt as if many days of such assiduous politeness would try her as much as it had done poor Mrs. Dacie.

But the mild trial was not to last days, only hours, and those even fewer than at first arranged.

Thursday was to see her returning with Mrs. Dacie. She sent a brief note home to that effect. At Wednesday's breakfast-table its president and vice-president received her with perturbation. They had

sent everywhere and could get no eggs! Could Miss Alwyn manage without them? Fish only came round once a week. That on Thursdays. Miss Thorne had gone herself to the only grocer's in Chaddeley for some coffee. It might be poor but it was the best to be purchased. They and Mary Ellen took tea. They didn't allow Mary Ellen coffee. With her habit it was too heating.

But they so wished to provide what Miss Alwyn liked. And would she mind dining early, and would she like lamb? They might be able to get a joint in the next village. If she preferred poultry, they would send to a mill two miles off for a chicken. Provoking to relate (*and* unusual) they had only a little cold meat in the house.

'Which will do—' began Sydney, but was interrupted with—

'Certainly not! Lamb or chicken it must be for you, Miss Alwyn! Unfortunately the peas are not forward enough to gather. I can't think why they are so late.'

'My dear,' said Mrs. Carew quite gravely, 'they couldn't tell Miss Alwyn would be here.'

'Of course not, Louisa, but they should not be behind. However you must whip some cream yourself for Miss Alwyn, with the gooseberry tart. If it had only been Friday now we could have offered her a Lutterthorpe cream-cheese.'

'Lutterthorpe,' repeated Sydney, 'I know that name. It is close to Guyswick.' It was indeed the hamlet where her old Nurse, Taffy, had lived. 'Is it far from here?'

'An hour or so by rail, I think; we

never go down that way,' answered Mrs. Carew. 'But the cheeses are only made on Fridays, I'm afraid.'

'I was not thinking of them,' said Sydney, 'but—' but rather of how delightful it would be to ease this household of her too clearly disturbing presence, and go forward to those regions of her childhood's holidays, thence perhaps to a glimpse of Guyswick, or even as far as Stillcote-Upton and Jacob Cheene. Whether she might venture on the full programme she must settle when started, but its first stage alone was too enticing to be rejected. Mrs. Dacie, consulted, saw no reason why she should not revisit her old haunts, chance brought her so near by. The sisters made a bad band at concealing, they were glad to be released of extra prandial preparations, and so, cheerful on all counts, ten o'clock saw Sydney on

the wing again, though only by a sluggard train which, dawdling along some thirty minutes, then set her down at a country junction, to wait another half-hour before getting on to Lutterthorpe.

Waiting was no hardship, though, on this brilliant summer morning. Her mind busy with remembrance of yesterday, with anticipation of to-morrow, though shrinking still from too close analysis of her own heart's desires, Sydney paced up and down, gazing at the rising hills and fruit-clad slopes that seemed to smile recognition at her, hearing, almost sharing the glad carolling of the larks soaring overhead. Presently, sauntering back from the platform's limit, she found a companion in delay. A dog-cart was just being driven from the asphalted yard; a tall man, alighted apparently therefrom, was standing by the endmost roof-supporting beam. The

station-master beside him was saying as she drew near :—

'You can go in five minutes, sir, if you take the loop line. But the mail by Stillcote gets to your place nigh as soon. That'll come through in twenty minutes.'

'Thanks. I should greatly prefer the first,' answered the traveller in a voice that arrested Sydney's attention. Resonant, pleasant, sad. Sounding, moreover, like some full note out of—it must be dreamland!

'If you like to sit down, sir, the room's empty——'

'I would rather stay just where I am.'

'Then if you stop still, sir, I'll sure to come with your ticket when your train runs in.'

And the civil functionary went off with a touch of the hat, checked before it had reached its full proportions. Syd-

ney went by to the end of her planked tether; returned and glanced furtively at the stranger. Had she ever met him before? He leant, arms folded, against the upright beam, a broad-framed figure of something more than common height, well enough dressed, but without a suspicion of the *petit maître* about him (what made recollection of Rupert Villiers measure itself by him for a moment, to a disadvantage?), a face powerful but not ungentle, brown moustached and bearded, hair chestnut, eyebrows darker still, drawn together over a resolutely down-bent gaze. Sydney passed close beside him. Not for a moment were his eyes lifted. She loitered on slowly, then turned back. He stood there, still as a statue. As she advanced a troop of people drove up and seized on the station-master for details of Welsh touring tickets, while their luggage was

wheeled on the platform in such a way as to bar the progress of a countryman with a huge basket of live fowl.

'If I mar'nt go one way I maun go the t'other!' cried this individual, essaying to pass in front of the yet immovable stranger; 'now then, master, stir up, won't ye, an' let a body go by!'

Thus adjured the gentleman started, moved abruptly in the wrong direction, and was within an ace of stumbling some four feet down on the metals below.

'Hold up!' cried Hodge, offering a not unfriendly shove to safer latitudes. 'Mind where you're a-goin' to! Seems to me'—apostrophizing Sydney, who involuntarily sprang forward, 'a chap as can't step straight afore noon-time ought to be 'shamed of himself, 'cept he be ha-a-lf bloind!'

And he grumbled himself off, with his

cackling freight, as the obstructor, his shoulder once more by the post of safety, muttered, 'Half! Would it were only half!' And Sydney, halting quite near him, saw with an access of profoundest pity that his thickly-lashed eyes, turned full upon her now, were absolutely sightless; the light of day to him only darkness!

Such a thrill of pain ran through her as she realised this, it seemed downright cruel to pass him by without one sign of sympathy. A rattling of points and shrill approaching scream announced the train he waited for. With snorts, as of exhausted efforts on such a hot day, the engine came puffing in. 'Late!' cried the guard, briskly, 'hurry up there, porter!' In the distance the six tourists were all clamouring for a reduction of fare. Carriage doors began closing. But the stranger Sydney watched seemed forgotten. With a wistful

sigh he moved his head now right, now left, as with old habitual gesture of full vision. It seemed as if he would be left behind. But this was more than the girl could suffer. Obedient to an instinct of courageous courtesy she went quite up to him and spoke. 'I think I heard you say you wished to go by this train. May I show you to a carriage?'

He turned towards her voice. 'I should be very grateful, but——'

There was no time to lose. 'Which class?' asked Sydney.

The colour rose to his forehead. 'It must be third.' 'Then,'—she could not say 'follow me,' so boldly placing her hand within his arm, 'this way, please. I am holding the door open. The compartment is empty. Now,' as he took his seat, 'will you allow me to fetch your ticket?'

But this service was not demanded. Up rushed the station-master with the needful passport. Sydney, releasing her hand, drew back with cheeks unnecessarily tingling, as her companion stooped nearer than he perhaps knew.

'I am very thankful,' he said, 'for your kindness. It is difficult to get used to being helpless.'

At the patient gravity of his manner tears sprang to her eyes.

'Ah, that it must be!' she murmured; 'I wish—' 'I could have done more,' she would have said, but the guard was calling out 'stand back!' With a shriek, off went the locomotive. His hat raised in farewell, the stranger was borne away, and Sydney devoted her few more minutes' loneliness to a vain hunt through memory's hiding-places for some clue to

an identity not altogether unknown, she felt convinced.

But she was still in a labyrinth on the matter when her own train rushed in, and having taken her place in a second-class (prudently enconomising for return with Mrs. Dacie: even ten-pound notes have an end!) her one fellow-journeyer occupied her attention for the half-hour they were together.

After few instants' comprehensive inspection travellers naturally make of each other, leaving in this case an impression of a person of early middle-age, homely and yet refined, denoted a gentlewoman by simple propriety of dress, none too rich, by the exquisite mending of her well-worn gloves, Sydney would have returned to meditating and watching westward for a first sight of the Malvern hills, but from the opposite corner came the question soon:

'Will you allow your window to be open as well as mine, if you please?'

'Certainly,' suiting the action to the response, 'it is warmer than an hour or two ago.'

'Oh, very hot indeed. Dreadful for travelling!'

'Now, I thought it delightful!' said Sydney, smiling.

'Which shows you bound on pleasure,' said the lady, with good humour not untinged by envy, and the somewhat querulous sigh she ended with bespoke some species of soothing, such as Sydney, out of her present mood, could well spare.

'I hope you are not bound on anything sad,' she said, quite earnestly, desiring no more encounters with sorrow that morning.

'Well, sad, no,' was the answer, rather with the air of talking being a relief, 'I've

only come away from something disappointing, as a good many things in this world are. I have been a good many miles and spent a good many shillings for nothing. Which is provoking.'

'Indeed it must be.'

'Do you know Northampton?'

'Not at all. I am from the east of England.'

'It was Northampton I went to yesterday. By appointment. To meet a lady I had corresponded with. A widow. Just the person who would have suited so well as—well, companion, or—to share our home. I thought I had got exactly what I wanted; then when we had our interview, the exasperating woman could only turn red and simper like a school-girl, and tell me she was going to get married again!'

At this Sydney broke into smiles—'It

was too bad of her, though,' she confessed; 'I think a telegram ought to have spared you your journey.'

'Just what I told her! And what makes seeing her all the more annoying is that I'm sure she would have suited excellently. Nice voice: liked reading; and most of all, wanted a home more than salary. Oh, dear! I wish this man had been at Hong-Kong before she'd met him.'

'Let us hope you will find someone else just as fitting. There must be plenty such,' said Sydney.

'Ah, but not to be found when you want them. And I really must have someone. There are circumstances—but I won't trouble you with those unless you know anyone who would fill the situation. I'm sure I would try and make her happy!'

Evidently a kind woman, thought

Sydney. Not very intellectual, but housewifely "comfortable." If ever dear, distant Mary Dacie needed a home—long might that day be coming!—here might have been one for her. But to mention this fancy would be absurd. So she could only answer that she had no such treasure on the roll-call of her acquaintance, but would remember the want, 'a good reader—a good voice—and very little salary.'

'But a good home,' put in the lady, charmed by Sydney's interest. 'I really may say that if she doesn't mind some—peculiarities, I know I would try and make her like it.'

'I think you would,' agreed Sydney, 'but if I ever found this valuable person, whom should I direct her to?'

'Oh dear, I have no card about me, but my address is here,' drawing an envelope from her satchel: 'You stop at Lutter-

thorpe?' as the train slackened speed. 'I must say good-day then. I wish you had been going into Herefordshire with me.'

She closed with a regretful handshake. Then Sydney alighted at the Lutterthorpe station, and as the train sped away into distance, read concerning her friend of few minutes that she was 'Miss Hurst, Wynstone, Capel Moor, Hereford.'

CHAPTER II.

AND THE FRUITS THEREOF.

Lutterthorpe, the hamlet by the busy, active little Lytter or Luter, that ran for miles gleaming in and out near by the railways, as if bent on excelling its new-fangled rival, Lutterthorpe lay basking in the glow of almost noon when Sydney Alwyn once more threaded her way through lanes her footsteps had not known for nigh three-quarters of her young life's years.

It had not altered much in all that time, or its changes lay lower than the surface;

Guyswick she could scarcely remember, but this, an enchanted village full of select delights to childhood, she had not forgotten. As she went with quick throbbing enjoyment up once familiar paths, the very cottages with their specialities, a row of silky-seeding poplars here, the hollow willow there, anon a bank covered with blue-eyed periwinkles, as of yore, seemed to beam amiable recognition on her. Farther up she could have laughed aloud at sight of 'The Rampant Lion' wearing the self-same expression that once upon a time had alarmed her into suspicion that he might turn alive and come down from his sign, with such artistic craft was depicted the grin bestowed by the noble animal on the unwary folk who entered his enticing portals!

Past the school, where the children came trooping and shouting out as she

went by, just as they did at twelve o'clock when she was small, and their riotous exit gave nurse and her the time of day, and there was the church, so different in its sombre solidity of lichen-tinted stone from the well-wearing freshness of eastern counties frequent rubble and flint. And round about the silent walls the many tombs were—ah, after all it only seemed a little while ago!—she had learned from 'Taffy' that 'widow' must not be encumbered with two *d's* and, by the testimony of numerous '*hic jacets*,' that never an *a* must intrude in '*Here* lieth.'

Almost the kind, quavering old voice sounded in her ears again. Almost she could feel the clasp of the old brown hand about her wrist.

She turned longingly to the humble homestead across the grassy lane,—the very same, with humming bees about it

and apple trees grown shadier and bigger —with half an expectation of seeing her old nurse, white coiffed and mob-capped, still in her sunny corner, clicking away with glittering pins at some mysterious manufacture in Welsh wool, destined for the encasement of Mrs. Lewis's legs!

But there the disillusionment began.

Nurse's favourite bench was tenanted now by a rabbit-hutch, whereof the dappled inhabitants worked their long ears and pliant little noses about most interrogatively, as she traversed the box-bordered path, but no other welcome was accorded Sydney from her once holiday haunt.

A woman of totally unfamiliar form and features opened the door to her knock, and looking with wonder on the young stranger lady, answered her enquiry with a surprised:—

'Lewis! Why no, miss. There've been

no Lewis live here this long while. We are Wades. There was a one, Lewis by name, but he went out afore the two people afore us. So I've heard.'

'Went out!' And a long time ago! This shifting of occupants seemed next to impossible: so utterly incongruous with the unaltered outward aspect of the place. Sydney looked very blank. She had been picturing to herself, unreasonably may-be —some glad astonishment at her appearing. This check overcast her, and threw her off the proposed lines of her day's excursion.

'Lewis is gone!' she repeated slowly; 'But—' half afraid to put the question for fear of possible reply, 'he is living? And still here, here at Lutterthorpe?'

'Oh, he be here or hereabouts, miss,' answered the woman, 'though where's he's dwellin' I can't rightly point you. We're

naught but fresh here ourselves, and I'm not much of a one to neighbour and get the news. We on'y took this place last Lammas.'

'Tha-n-k you,' said Sydney, beginning to turn away ruefully. The cottage interior was not inviting now. With no one who cared to see her there would be no sense in stopping about it.

But the woman lingered, latch in hand, so she explained to her.

'I used to come here often when I was younger. And I made a journey this morning on purpose to look at it all again. I suppose I foolishly calculated on seeing the people in it just as when I last left.'

'Which, askin' your pardon, was like reckonin' of your chickens afore they was hatched, miss!' returned Mrs. Wade, taking the proverb of her calling, apparently, for matronly hens with numerous progeny

were now scraping about the once tidy garden.

'True enough,' Sydney agreed, self-convicted; 'and you cannot even tell me then which way I must go to find Lewis's house. I did so wish to see some of them.'

'Oh, if you'd like to see 'em—or leastways see the man, miss,' said Mrs. Wade, the young lady's desires just finding their way to her slow brain, 'why you can do that easy without trackin' after where they live. I know him jest by sight. And I see him go by not half-an-hour ago. An' he turned in at yon gate. The piece there where they be cutting green stuff for the cows.'

This sounded better. With a cheerfuller 'thank you' Sydney took the route indicated. A running stream on one side—she had dipped her toes in many a time, a

bank with huge primrose leaves drooping in the heat the other, fairy ground for the age of five, greeted her like some long laid-by picture. Nothing lacked but the saluting 'Miss Sydney, dear.' Wanting that, a chill of loneliness crept over her, rebuked, as she passed the outer length of Lewis's old garden and the stile she had often climbed, by a swift thought of that other so far greater loneliness, which had crossed her road as it were a moment that same day, and then gone by, lost, in a sightless solitude.

'While I have everything!' she chid herself, half aloud, and, with the abundant measure of these good gifts upon her mind, turned in at the green acre to which she had been directed.

Two men at the extreme end were reaping fodder. One a lad: the other a burly figure well into years, working with

a will, not in the easy-going one-and-eightpence a day style of the ordinary labourer. That looked like Lewis, she fancied. He had always been the very soul of industry. Probably he had prospered. Had got a dairy now beside his market-garden. Yes, certainly that must be Lewis. But she would wait to claim him till he drove his nearly laden cart up to the gate by which she stood. Then she would stop him. Puzzle him at first. Afterwards tell him who she was. Perhaps he would take her off proudly to some finer home than his old one. And it was just within the range of possibility the 'Taffy' of old times might yet be there with a 'who is it? My child, little Sydney! Has she come again, bless her!'

Meantime, while her youth was thus making light of Mrs. Wade's wise saw the sun was beating down strong upon her;

the air was getting sultry, vibrating now and again with sounds as of a distant storm.

Casting about for some shade, she found it beneath a wide-spreading elm, whose knotted and mossy trunk offered a pleasant resting-place, whereon she gladly seated herself, a pretty enough picture as of typical June, spring lingering in the bright anticipation of her eyes and on her smiling lips, while the soft sweeping lines of her form spoke the early summer of her sex.

A few yards from her, unnoticed at first, sat some one else. A man terribly bent by toil or sickness. Very poor, evidently, for, as he raised himself with difficulty, and leaning hard on his ash stick, came towards her, she saw his thread-bare fustian was darned and pieced like veritable patchwork. A stubbly growth of hair

about his face, very sunken cheeks and an aspect of suffering appeal, made him a painful, pitiful object, and Sydney's hand naturally sought her purse as he drew near.

But he was not begging. He only asked her civilly if she were wanting to speak to the master yonder, and should he go and fetch him.

'No, I thank you,' Sydney answered, 'I can stop for him here or go across myself. I am afraid moving about hurts you.'

He looked such an appropriate object for a shilling, she opened the way thus intentionally to his asking it. 'Hurts! You're right, Miss. I get crippleder and crippleder every day. My aches and pains have come atop of one another till they've nigh bent me double and—' with a nasty rough cough that seemed to rack him, 'this winter's bout was worst of all.'

'What was it? Rheumatism?' questioned Sydney, used enough to this, the cottager's arch enemy. 'Don't keep standing,' she added, 'I wish you had not disturbed yourself for me.'

'Thank you, Miss, kindly. No—' lowering himself cautiously on the bank at a respectful distance, 'it weren't that this time. It were brown-chitis. That kept a hold of me from Michaelmas till May. And it have left me as weak as water. I haven't done a day's work not for nine months. And I dursn't look to do no more as long as I've got to live.'

'But this warm weather ought to do you good' suggested Sydney hopefully. 'Perhaps you will get much stronger before next winter.'

He shook his head.

'T'aint likely, Miss. Get brown-chitis follerin' after three seasons of rheumatism

such as twist a man's joints about like wax, and set 'em out of shape like mine, why you don't pick up strength in a hurry.'

'No indeed. It must be a dreadful disease. So your pains and troubles began with that.'

'My pains began so—in my j'ints, Miss: but my troubles—good heart alive, *they* begun different enough; and times before!'

(The workers yonder had set about another strip of clover. Sydney knew full well what delight it is to the poor to hold converse on their own woes, so lent her few minutes' leisure to gratify this ailing labourer.)

'Ah, if you have had other troubles, they make you less able to bear illness, do they not?'

'Right again, Miss—right. That's what I've said the whole way through. Give a

man a good stout heart and he can hold his own 'gainst wind and weather and physic and worrets. But you take that away, and everything seem to rub him on the raw. There's nothing can make up for a good stout heart. Nothin'. I lost mine whiles ago. And my labour have been nothin' but heaviness ever since.'

'Poor fellow!' (He touched his worn old hat to her compassionate tone.) 'How came it all about?' (Could she spare half a sovereign if his tale seemed as truthful as sad?)

'Why, the same way, Miss, a-many has met their downfall. I worked and worked from the hour I could hold a rake or plant a spade: and I stored and saved where others lived free and spent: and I was as thrifty as a ant as far as I knew how: and I got a bit of property like together in solid pounds: and then I took and trusted the

whole, the scrapins and screwins of fifty years, to one man, and he lost 'em for me! All!'

'Oh how hard! How hard!'

'Ay, hard it was. I took him for sure as the bank itself, that man. I wouldn't believe my own ears when word first come to me of what he'd done. But I got to believe it, and I'd got to bear it. And that's what took the heart out of me. And this here's what it have brought me to.'

'But had you no friend, no son, nor anyone to help you then?'

'I never had a son. I'd girls. And I'd trusted this man so sort of stupid-like—for I'd worked for him close on forty years—I'd even give him my lasses' few shillin's as they'd earned then, along of mine. And another body's too. Older than me by a score. Hers went with the rest. And thank the Lord she soon went after it.

And she's slept herself out of her sorrows. I know jist where she lays, poor old soul, though we hadn't enough among us to put a headstone over her.'

As yet Sydney had not recognised, not dreamt of putting together these scattered links. But now a monitory shudder ran through her.

Was it the tempest, drawing near in splendid masses of leaden and silver cloud, that set her trembling? And was the fate tender or harsh which impelled her to draw the story out to its cruel end?

'Was there no one belonging to your debtor who could give you back anything? You, only a poor man!'

'No. None that would.'

'Now that does seem a shame.'

'Ay. A shame it was then and a shame it is now. We all said so. I didn't stand alone. There was others lost their all the

same as me. And though their just belongin's was gone, why for very likin' of the man that lost 'em they'd have said "thank-you" for a few pounds back, and they'd a-set to and made another start. Such as could. Just my rent would ha' put spirit into me. A tithe of what was gone would ha' set a-many on their feet again. But none of us got it. None of us. There come the shame. For look ye, Miss—' (Sydney leant forward, listening intently, with parted lips. No mirth in her eyes now.) 'Him that ruined us went clear away. Clean out of sight, and nobody here set eyes on him no more. Word come round among us that he took ill and never held his head up till he died. The thoughts of that has shut my mouth up many a time, else I'd have curse——'

'No, no! Don't say it! Don't *say* it!

For—for he's dead, you know!' cried Sydney, cowering strangely.

'But let him be? Well, so I may, for he can't make me nor mar me no more. But now, you think of this, Miss; see if I mayn't feel angered. His fine lady-wife goes off at the first clap of ruin, as proud as any queen. And takes her money, hers, that her husband give her when they wedded, thousands on thousands, and never cast a farthing back to lift up them her husband's pulled down. And she takes a whole power of fine things he's bought her; and goes over to the other side of the land; and lives among the high people; and never knows the meaning of the word "want!" And she's got daughters—' (Sydney grew pale)—'fine dames like herself; brought up so dainty the very wind have to take care how it blow on 'em. And

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she've got fine soft clothing heaped up that she never knows a need for—(I lay cold in the long winter!) And she gives away her delicate things where they ain't wantin' and never misses 'em. And yet, yet,'—what with his weakness and recounted wrongs the man was almost sobbing—'yet when my wife writes—unbeknown to me—I've asked naught of no man—and when my wife tells her on'y our girls' earnin's keep us from the House, and I'm with one foot in the grave like, and the wolf's always at our door; she makes answer, this lady with her chiney and her di'monds and her laces, that any more such beggin' letters'll be burnt, and on'y just for once she sends us half-a-crown!'

(She knew it was coming. Link had been clasping link as the tale went on. Her white face turned now away; a sense of almost stupor spread over heart and

head. But through it sounded on, horribly distinct, the syllables that were to clench her dismay, shut down the lid on the last faint hope of escape, and fling away the key !)

'Half-a-crown ! While her and hers can live in wicked waste, me and mine may lay and starve or rot for all she cares ! That makes a man forget he's called a Christian, Miss. Ill as the turn he did me, I'll never bring myself to believe John Alwyn would have served me so, if he'd had a finger in the way I was treated. But there's a God above as notes such doin's as this great lady's. From Him she'll get her due for 'em, this world or the next. Sure, ay, sure as my name's Lewis !'

He left off at last, panting; lifted his battered hat to wipe the drops of moisture from his lined forehead. Sydney was shivering in every nerve. Not a word

could she utter. Lost in a whirl of bitterest emotions, she leant upon her hands, cold now as ice, for all the noontide heat, struggling to hide the agitation which possessed her. Far sooner calmer than his listener, Lewis said presently, in his old, slow, much-enduring tone,

'I ask your pardon, Miss. I've wore you out with all my talk. 'Taint often I let loose like that now-a-days. But you seemin' to listen so real kind like, why, I ran on as I didn't ought to. Here comes Mr. Barnet, side of his cart at last. Shall I fetch him up to you?'

'No: I thank—you. I was not wanting —Mr. Barnet. I am—so grieved—for —you. And'—rising, somewhat dizzy—'will you take this?'—holding out her poor, paltry piece of gold with a tingling of self-appropriated guilt. 'Yes, you must. Please keep it. And'—she was getting

suffocated now with hardly held back tears —'and, Mr. Lewis, will you—will you try to forgive—your debtor? He—did—not —go—unpunished!'

She took his hard, miss-shapen hand in hers a moment very gently; met his astonished gaze with a look of passionate pleading; then, turning away, passed swiftly from the field, tears raining down her cheeks, and was lost to sight before the wonder-struck man could acknowledge, far less comprehend, her gift.

And before he had laboured painfully home out of the tempest gathering rapidly around, and had recounted his most strange adventure to his wife, Sydney was far away from Lutterthorpe, journeying on again—this time to Stillcote-Upton.

CHAPTER III.

MR. CHEENE HAS A CALLER.

It was market-day in that town, and the nearest approach to commercial activity it contrived to keep out of the octopus-like clutches of the neighbouring county centre, was stirring in its streets that Wednesday mid-day.

On the Cornhill, farmers, prosperous enough to have held their stacks intact through winter and spring, rolled the contents of their fat little sample bags unctuously in their broad palms, and drove hard bargains at rising prices. Their less

lucky or sagacious *confrères* took gloomy views of agriculture, vowed the late hot weeks had brought the corn up too fast, recorded a fall in the glass, prophesied wet setting in, and the extinction of income for their entire class. But most of them, hopeful or depressed, found time to do justice to mine host of the King's Head's ample two o'clock meal, and the feminine members of their families found means to keep the shop astir throughout the main thoroughfares.

But the tide of traffic and purchasers stopped short of that part which had been the chief entrance to the town in the time of coaching and carriage gentility. Life seemed diverted now to the region of the railway. Grass grew between the paving-stones of this wide South Street. Few came up or down except to the very respectable dwellings that flanked its

breadth, and its thinly-scattered shops might almost have put up their shutters for all the custom they attracted.

That was the opinion of one who had sat behind the counter of her modest establishment from nine in the morning, without taking as many as nine pence.

Her very anxious, not to say shrewish face puckered up under an arrangement of small wiry curls, Miss Amelia Ambler watched the passers-by with cat-like interest; arranged her buttons, dusted her cottons and assorted her attenuated store of 'general haberdashery and Berlin wools,' bemoaning the while that change of fashion which permitted the larger establishments of High Street to lure away the humble chances of sale.

'They sell buttons at crockery-shops and tapes at the bookseller's now-a-days, I declare,' she grumbled, aloud—if no one came

to talk to her she must talk to herself. 'It gets worse and worse every year. And now if it isn't coming on to rain. Oh, me! if ever I'd suspected things reaching this pass I'd positively have gone straight out and been a menial servant. I should have earned as much between now and then so, I'll be bound.'

And the 'then' seemed to draw her attention to an announcement in fine, flourishing capitalled caligraphy, dated many years back, that 'Miss Amelia Ambler, having from circumstances resumed her business in South Street, begged a renewal of former kind support, which, by earnest endeavours,' &c., &c.

This document, broadly framed in black, hung prominently by the door, and now showed such an accumulated coat of dust that its mistress descended wrathfully from her high stool to brush it clean,

murmuring as she did so, 'What a head that idle Nancy has. I've a good mind not to keep her on. She isn't worth her food.'

Now, this cursory mention of food was followed by a distinct sensation of hunger in Miss Ambler's own pinched frame. 'Half-past one,' she said, listening to the chimes, as she set straight a tray of brass thimbles a juvenile schoolgirl had tumbled into disorder and then departed without finding one to fit; 'will Nancy never learn to be punctual? Why doesn't she bring my dinner?' and, opening the door in the rear of the shop, she demanded explanation of some invisible being still further back.

'Please, miss,' responded a shrill young voice, 'I've eat the top of the loaf as was left myself, and the baker he hain't been yet, so what am I to bring you, miss?'

This was a poser. But it was beneath Miss Ambler's dignity to admit herself nonplussed.

'Oh, it's no consequence then, Nancy,' she cried, 'I can take—h'm—anything I like when Mr. Potts comes round, or I can send you out presently for a beef pie or three penn'orth of ham.'

'Yes, miss, to be sure,' Nancy, the unseen, answered; but she gave an internal chuckle of glee at having secured that last top crust and the lodger's dripping for her own clamorous organs. Experience had taught her to mistrust her mistress's magnificent speeches, which mostly ended in smoke!

Even as this one. For Miss Ambler looked dejectedly in her till. There lay the four shillings she put in every morning for show, and took out every night for fear of thieves, and there lay very little

else. A very poor prospect did that till offer of any such delicacies as beef pies. She shook her head and mentally rejected the luxurious notion. Mr. Potts's loaf would have to content her, and—she should be uncommonly glad when that came!

Someone else in the house was rather perplexed on the subject of diet just at that time.

In a room over the little neglected shop, tidy but poorly furnished, sat Mr. Jacob Cheene, at his very frugally furnished dinner-table, eyeing the comestibles just placed thereon by the small housescrub, with a rather disapproving expression.

The display certainly was neither abundant nor appetising.

Lukewarm potatoes of last year's growth, plentifully spotted with this spring's sproutings; a fragment of yesterday's rice

pudding; very stale bread *vis-à-vis*-ed by very crusty cheese; these were evidently not inviting to our old acquaintance, who, somewhat thinner and more stooping than when he went a-visiting at St. Clairs, first inspected them disconsolately, and then, brightening with a happy flash, got up and called down the stairs to the attendant Nancy:—

'I am waiting for the cold mutton. Bring it up, please.'

'Mutton, sir,' repeated Nancy, bolting from her den at the back into the tiny sitting-room where the stairs debouched; 'What mutton is it you mean, please, sir? There aren't none that I know of.'

'Not the piece I left yesterday?' questioned Mr. Cheene mildly.

'Not a mossil, sir, that I see, nowheres. Perhaps you went and eat it for your supper and forgot it, sir.'

'Certainly I didn't do that,' answered Mr. Cheene; 'look again, Nancy.'

Which, with much clatter, as of assertively empty plates and dishes, Nancy did, returning with confirmation of her first report:

'There ain't not a scrap, sir, nowhere. Perhaps the cat next door——'

'Nancy!' said the voice of the mistress. 'Take your apron off and mind the shop till I come back. Shut the door. Oh, Mr. Cheene,' her head appearing at a turn of the stairs, 'was it the little taste of your cold chop you were asking about?'

'Y-e-s,' Mr. Cheene admitted nervously that it was. 'But it was no consequence,' he added: 'not the very least.'

'But truth is truth, and you'd better have it, sir, as I hope you always do, and won't ever have your confidence, Mr.

Cheene, misplaced, not in me! So I may as well say'—coming a few steps higher, her sharp old spinster countenance at once defiant and sheepish—'I—I had it with my cup of tea last night. For'—gazing at Mr. Cheene's well-worn boots as though defying them to contradict her—'I said to myself, of course Mr. Cheene will never think of asking for a bite like this any more, and I may as well finish it as let it stand and go bad, which with thunder in the air it's sure to do, and then even a dog will turn it's nose up at it.'

'Quite right. Oh, very right, Miss Amelia.'

'But if I'd expected you to want it for your *dinner*, Mr. Cheene; if I'd thought inquiries were going to be made for that little bit of fat and gristle, for it was nothing else, why I wouldn't so much as have touched it with the tip end of my fork.'

'Pray don't——'

'Though, as it happened, I'd nothing handy for my tea, and Nancy had gone home, and I always believed, Mr. Cheene, our understanding when you took my rooms was that I was to have the use of odds and ends. But if you wish that altered, Mr. Cheene,' advancing another step, 'if'—with an ominous and unaffected sniff—'you wish me to suffer more——'

'But I don't! My dear soul, I don't indeed!' protested Mr. Cheene, retreating. 'I beg your pardon, I'm sure, for mentioning that mutton. Of course it would have gone bad. I never thought of that. So I'm very much obliged to you, indeed, for not letting it be wasted. And any——'

'Wanted, miss!' cried Nancy, from below, 'a lady, please.' And, to Mr. Cheene's extreme relief, Miss Ambler had to rub her nose, adjust her curls, and

hurry off to her customer; hope easily extinguished as easily relighted in her much enduring bosom. Sometimes a purchaser had been driven in by rain and bought several shillings' worth of goods while taking shelter. This might be one of such welcome sort. A money-box *had* jumped out of the kitchen fire that morning, and unless signs were as altered as the rest of these degenerate times that must bring luck!

Catching sight of no omens for good or ill in the air about him, but uncommonly relieved at having his task of soothing his landlady cut short, Mr. Cheene returned to his room and addressed himself to his viands with what appetite the episode had left him. Which was not much, for, more or less nervous all his life through, altercation of any sort upset him doubly now. 'If I don't take much dinner, perhaps I shall

enjoy my tea more,' he said to himself, covering up the nausea-provoking tubers. Then, helping himself to a modicum of Cheshire: 'I think Miss Amelia may as well toast up the rest of this for herself. She'll like that. It'll make up to her, poor soul, for my going and distressing her as I did, very thoughtlessly, very, indeed! And she can finish this loaf. I don't want much of it. A full meal is a bad thing if you are going to sit still after it all day. And the storm is not over, so I sha'n't get a walk. I must have a tune or two instead, then'—leaving his meal with much the same appetite as he began—'then I shall forget all about such things as mutton or new potatoes!'

And herewith he unlocked a well-worn black case, lifted thence his viola, and had just sounded the first bars of one of Corelli's little gossiping gavottes, when Nancy broke

in upon him with important haste:—

'Pease, sir, missus says can I clear away? There's a lady coming up to see you.'

'A lady?' stopping short, bow suspended.

'Yes, sir, what came into the shop when I was a-mindin' of it, with her parasol soakin.' And she want you, sir, not missus.'

Now, midsummer was approaching, and Jacob had more than one female visitor of mature years, about quarter-days. Here was one a trifle beforehand, no doubt. He laid his viola and bow aside to take a look at his purse, asking,

'Is it Mrs. Goode or Mrs. Tettrell, Nancy?'

'Neither, nor both, sir,' was the sharp reply. 'This here's a lady, sir, and a young 'un; not a frump and an old 'un!

Mrs. Goode, indeed! Ladies behave very different to what she do! Only last time she come says she to me'—sweeping the table straight at perilous speed—'"Girl," she says, "if you couldn't keep Mr. Cheene's steps no cleaner than this, I'd——"'

'Nancy!'

At the voice of her mistress the lively handmaid and her tray retired with rapidity: Miss Ambler ushered in the visitor with, 'As the lady has not given me her name, Mr. Cheene, I can't say who it is!' And Jacob received the stranger with unceremonious unrecognition that lasted till the door was closed upon them. Then, as she looked at him with a most uncertain and petitioning smile, and 'Oh, surely, Mr. Cheene, you remember me!' he knew who she was, and fell into a perfect tremor of delight over her arrival.

Again and again he shook her hands, and though he ventured on no compliments, his glances of admiring pride told how he delighted in her fair growth. He fetched from the bow-window a high-backed, horse-hair seated chair for her to occupy, and hunting up, as who best hides best finds, a little walnut stool from beneath a pile of music, he set it under her feet, and then leaning on the back of his own chair, an armless facsimile of hers, he gazed long at her with his old pleasure-dimmed eyes.

'Only to think you should come unawares upon me like this now, my dear, my dear Miss Sydney!' he repeated. 'When I've settled so often how I've meant to get ready for you if I knew you were going to give me a look. And now you've caught me just anyhow. With no nice little dinner, not even a bunch of

flowers set out to show how glad I am to see you: and how proud; how proud! Oh,' —rubbing his thin old hands softly in a very ecstacy of enjoyment, 'the times I have dreamt of seeing you—sitting just as you do sit in your father's very own chair! But I never dared expect it. An old man like me, a tenant on leave, for I'm over my three-score-and-ten, Miss Sydney, oughtn't to expect anything too surely. But to have got just what I wished for so long seems too good to be true. It does, indeed!'

And Mr. Cheene's joy impairing his powers of vision seriously, he had to retire with much blinking to the bow-window, and examine the state of the weather, before he found himself equal to resuming coherent conversation. When he returned—his features composed, but beaming still—it struck him suddenly that some-

thing was amiss with his guest. Sydney had entered, flushed from her interview with Miss Ambler. The landlady—curious as maiden ladies will be—had very pointedly requested her name to carry, and had stared in blank disapproval when it was quietly refused. 'Only someone who wishes to see Mr. Cheene,' John Alwyn's daughter had said, remembering, with a blush of the deepest shame, that to mention who she was in Stillcote-Upton, might only awaken slumbering stories to her father's discredit. Now the painful colour had faded away, and she sat, her dark eyes following him so pathetically, from a face so pale, that Jacob Cheene hurried to her, asking—

'Was she ill? or had the lightning frightened her? The tempest had been sharp a little while.'

'No, I'm not ill, Jacob,' she answered,

taking his hands in hers—it seemed a sort of haven; 'and the tempest did not frighten me. I hardly noticed it. Something else has—frightened me!'

'And that, Miss Sydney?'

'Please pull your chair close, and sit down by me. For, Jacob—' still keeping hold of him, and leaning leftways on the firm oaken arm (just her father's old attitude through many a business hour), 'I am going to ask you some questions. You will answer them, will you not?'

'If I can.'

'And I know you can. Somehow—you can tell me how afterwards—when my father left Guyswick had he just lost all his money?'

Jacob's nerves gave a great jump. Sydney could feel it through all her own frame.

'I am—afraid—he had.'

'All?

'All.'

'And—had he—lost other people's money, too?'

The question came on the old clerk as the unannounced application of a cold water douche. He would have given a quarter's income to be out of that witness-box. But there was no escape. Sydney's grave eyes waited on him for answer, and true answer he had to give.

'Y-e-s, Miss Sydney. He had. Or——' trying to soften the harsh fact's rough edges, 'other people's money got lost—with his.'

'With his. By his doing, then?'

'Yes.' Parting from the bald truth about as willing as a dog parts from a cherished bone. 'But——'

'Oh, hush—a moment!'

She leant back, his hand still in hers,

paler, if possible, than ever. Was her father's memory—that which with such tenderness she had kept fresh so many years—now to be blackened; her birthright of honourable pride to be taken from her? Well might she ask breathing space before listening to detailed evidence of such misfortune! But it was only a few seconds she wavered.

'Now, Jacob,' she said, rallying, upright again; 'you must tell me the whole, please. From beginning to end. How did the money go?'

'It was in a mine—a copper-mine, Miss Sydney, somewhere in the south of England. A thing—' said the old clerk, wrinkling up his forehead in emphasis, 'my master knew just as much about as—as—a baby, or as myself! It was a new concern just when he married. It seems he put a thousand pounds in them.

Your uncle, Mrs. Alwyn's brother, helped to start it, I believe. No doubt he named it to your father.'

'Did *he* lose anything in it?'

'Not a penny. The shares went up quickly, and he sold out. When they were first rising your father bought more.'

'Jacob, did you think it wise? Why did you not try to stop him?'

'Miss Sydney! Stop him! Why there was not one of us in the office knew what he was doing. And if any had known, they'd never have questioned but what he was right. Least of all should I have doubted him—him who had ruled me always to my well-doing; as some day you must hear. You—you ought to. There wasn't a man's judgment more looked up to than his for miles about. And properly, in all things, he had knowledge of. But ——' with a sad shake of the head, 'mines

weren't among them. They were beyond even him.'

'Then, Jacob, how did the—crash come?'

'Well, from all we could find out, Miss Sydney, there was warning months before. It seems his dividend—the interest on his shares—didn't come in as it should, and he went down to the place, just between Devon and Dorsetshire, to look into it all. I remember the journey, though I didn't know what it was for at the time.'

'And he found nothing out?'

'No. There was a clever manager at the works, and my master was no match for him. He brought accounts forward to show how matters had come to a lock-up for a few months, but couldn't fail to right-side themselves before long. And, between lies and persuading, he sent your father home pretty satisfied that his money was

safe enough; as it had need have been, for Guyswick was making off with a fortune of ready cash just then.'

'But of course he was deceived?'

'Through thick and thin, Miss Sydney—through thick and thin. A fortnight before his summer interest was due he got word that creditors were down on the concern for debts for plant—that's machinery, you know, and so forth—and debts at different banks, and sums of all sorts, that should have been all cleared off before a single share took a farthing's interest. If it had been managed right, people who understood it said it ought to have prospered; but it was just muddled and mismanaged, or managed unscrupulously the whole way through, and so it came to grief. Such things are always going on in the trade market, and honest men are always getting ruined, I suppose. But

everyone had such trust in your father, it didn't seem possible that he should be taken in, and all his fine property lost. It was days before people could bring themselves to believe it.'

'But had he actually put all he had in this mine, then?'

Such action struck even his child's crude business judgment with dismay.

'No, no, Miss Sydney, not on the face of it. But all this happened, you know, before the time of limited liability companies. And when the mine stopped, and the manager, who had saved *himself* feathers to fly with, was gone off and nowhere to be found, it turned out there was scarcely a man among the shareholders with five hundred pounds, except your father, and—well—he was by a long way the richest. So it was on him the blow fell heaviest. And it broke him up completely, body and

spirit, and nearly killed him.' It was a miserable reminiscence. Poor Jacob reflected Sydney's trouble. 'And he had none of his old strength, not a scrap of his old skill left to fight life any more, either for himself or others. And that's all, my dear.'

'Not quite, Jacob.' (It was plenty, and sad enough. Would that it had been all!) 'How came others here in Stillcote to be ruined with—through him?'

'Need we talk of it, Miss Sydney? It's all over, and done with now.'

'We must, please. Who were they?'

'People who had given him—lent him their money.'

'Lent! Did he want it?'

'No; but you see his name stood for as good as gold hereabouts. So people put their earnings or their savings in his hands, just as soon as they'd have put them—ay,

in the Funds. So first one and then another, brought him a hundred or two, just taking his simple note of hand for it; and all that—went with the rest!'

'Even Lewis's—even my poor old nurse's! Oh, Jacob! no wonder he nearly died of it!' Loosing her hand to hide her tear-laden eyes. 'Tell me who, beside Taffy, lost their saving?'

'Miss Sydney, it's no good——'

'It is. Tell me.'

'Well,' very reluctantly, 'there was Miss Ambler—her you saw downstairs.'

'Was hers much?'

'The most of any. About six hundred. She and her mother had had the shop below for years. Luckily, they had bought this house. And they had just retired, thinking their thirty pounds a year and a lodger or two would keep them comfortably.'

'And then they had to begin again. Poor things! Who else was there?'

'Oh, you don't even know their names, Miss Sydney. Tradespeople, mostly, who'd known your father all their lives. There was the office-keeper, old Susan Coombes.'

'Wait a moment, please. Can you lend me a pencil? Yes, Susan Coombes: how much was hers?'

He told her: and seeing that having heard part, she must hear all, he told one by one the humble creditors, a long string of names, representing many a lowly tragedy of—alas!—her father's making.

'And—we—went away, with money secured to us, and never left anything for these unlucky folks?' she asked, crimsoning at that depth of disgrace.

'Why, you were a child. You had no part in it, Miss Sydney. And your father

—he was a child too by then! And your mother—Mrs. Alwyn—well, she had perfect legal right to her settlements. Every penny. If she chose.'

'Legal! Yes. But——'

Sydney dared not utter the thoughts that would surge up in her breast. Jacob could well interpret the impatient pause.

'So there was no one to do anything for them?'

'No one, worth mentioning, I'm afraid. You see I hadn't much myself.'

'Jacob! I don't mean you.'

'Ah, but I would if I'd been able. But, strange enough, all I'd put by I sank for my life just before our troubles. It was your father's advice. I wanted him to take it and he refused——'

'Thank heaven!'

'"Do as I tell you," he said. "Sink it, then it's safe. You have no one to leave

it to, and may as well have all the benefit of it you can." So I have only enough to live on, Miss Sydney, with just a little to spare. I do try to make the most of that little among the worst off of—that list. I'm afraid I haven't seen after Lewis as I ought. But it does go such a little way. It's only like a drop in the sea. And the worst of it is, that'll have to end when I end.'

'Jacob!' She put her arms about this good friend's shoulders, and, weeping, lifted his hand to her lips. 'Dear, true old Jacob, God bless you for what you have been doing. There is only myself left to thank you, and I can't half do it as I should. Now I know who sent my father back his violin!'

'Ah, well'— shy under her gratitude as any girl—'that's not worth speaking of. Good as it was, I bought it for a mere

song, just to keep it from the dealers.'

'And this too?' touching the chair in which she sat. 'And what else, Jacob.'

'Only his office book-case, Miss Sydney, and the table, and his desk there.' Her eyes wandered wistfully to each as he named it. 'Just what I couldn't bear to see knocked about after he'd used them forty years. And a few books and trifles, such as would have gone to light the fire, if I hadn't taken them. But now my dear young lady——' She was regaining such steady firmness, sitting there with her beautiful mouth closed fast on all complaint, he thought the worst of the disclosure was well over, and he might beguile her to other subjects—'Now, do let me fetch you some lunch. I don't know yet how far you have come to-day, or even what brought you. But you should take something.'

But Sydney would have nothing, nor would let him leave her, so he listened, perforce, to the account of her journey, and the slightly interwoven chances that had drawn her on to the day's discoveries, in the midst of which an eight-day clock up in a corner (another of the old clerk's bargains) struck three, and startled her into recollection that she must be returning at once to Chaddeley.

A quarter past does your train go?' said Mr. Cheene, in a panic. 'Why, it's quick walking that takes you there in ten minutes. It takes me double now-a-days. But, dear, dear, only to have had you such a little while—and to have done nothing but give you pain—and to let you go without a thought to give you comfort——'

She stopped him, fetching up, to soothe his perturbation, a smile that shone like

returning sunshine through the last drops of the shower without.

'If I could have had my choice I would not have been spared this pain,' she said, and then halted half-a-minute. Fleeting by she seemed to see phantoms of all her late-born projects fading out, the glow her money was to cast over her future. Uncertain, receding, a figure hovered —Rupert Villiers'. Was that to vanish too! But then uprose an hour, a promise of long ago, to ease a pain she had not understood till now. 'Father, never fear, I will make it all right.' Cost what it might, as far as in her lay she would keep faith with the dead. 'Now everything is clear to me,' she went on, gently, clearly, 'I see what must be done. And you will help me to do it.'

'To do what?' Mr. Cheene asked, bewildered.

'To pay what has been kept back so long. We can just manage it, for it is not quite six thousand. I shall write to you from St. Clairs, Jacob. And the money shall be with you next week. Good-bye.'

CHAPTER IV.

'THERE'S MANY A SLIP——'

In the warm early evening of the day following Sydney's visit to Stillcote-Upton, Mrs. Alwyn and her nephew strolled up and down the lawn at The Dale in conclave of peculiarly private nature.

Each had a design, definite and very similar, at heart. Both were bent on having it discussed and done with before Sydney's return, expected now in some half-hour; and their conversation hovered about the important point, like bees over a blossom, undecided whereabouts to commence operations.

Leonora, rather partial generally to a twilight stroll with her personable cousin, kept out of the way now, obedient to a hint from her mother. But she made herself heard, if not seen. Her florid execution of '*Robert, toi que j'aime,*' was frightening the sparrows from their nests in the ivy about the drawing-room windows, though it was quite past their proper bed-time, and her '*grace pour moi, grace pour toi,*' pierced the still air beyond The Dale to cottage tenements, evoking the doubtful compliment that 'young miss yonder, she could screech mighty fine, an' no mistake.'

'Your father admires that cavatina so much,' said Mrs. Alwyn, when the last vocal entreaty died out, exhausted, on the final D; 'he remembered Grisi singing it, and thinks Leonora almost equal to her in it.'

Mr. Rupert's glance followed the gyra-

tions of a bat overhead to conceal a suspicious smile. His excellent father knew about as much of music as he himself of warfare. But on no account would he gainsay the Major's flattery. So he quashed his superior experience of sopranis' abilities and agreed, 'Leonora does sing brilliantly indeed. We must get her to please the pater with that to-morrow night: when Sydney and I——'

'Well? When Sydney and you——?'

'Have just such a stroll as this. With your good leave, Aunt Helen.'

'Or without it, I suspect, by then,' she answered with a satisfied laugh.

'I hope we may take it for granted without going far wrong,' replied Mr. Rupert, with easy assurance, 'unless you mean to change sides and give my lady fair to some one else at the last moment.'

'Which is very probable, is it not?

You forget, my dear nephew, how your suit began.'

'Indeed, I do nothing of the sort; nor that I am your debtor from that moment, and have not done with your good offices yet, Aunt Helen.'

This was nearing business, but each politely gave each other the *pas* on the delicate ground approached.

'Ah, a few hours may change your modest deference, Mr. Rupert.' (No response to his. The young man was cautious. It seemed she must go first.) 'But, by the way, before Sydney comes, I was wanting to say that I hope your father will not think we have asked him over for to-morrow at the last moment just for business purposes. I should be sorry for him to fancy that.'

'Not the least likely, seeing he angled unblushingly for an invitation! His pre-

text of just running down to resign his trusteeship formally was a most transparent excuse, Aunt Helen, for satisfying himself that all was safe and sure between Sydney and me. He is spending a great deal of ardour on the whole affair, I assure you.'

'Which is amiable of him!' murmured Mrs. Alwyn, not giving utterance to her uppermost thought—that her son had not been too lavish of the same quality throughout the 'affair.' 'So we must let him share our pleasure to the full, Rupert. I know Sydney will be enchanted to see him. That I can venture to say for her. They made fast friends with each other on his last visit. They have a good deal in common, I think. Both impressionable, enthusiastic, eh? And—er—not very business-like; is it not so? Which brings me to what I was going to mention to *you*—for

really we ought not to trouble your father after to-morrow with Sydney's pecuniary arrangements. I think you and I should undertake them.'

'Most willingly, Aunt Helen.'

'You won't consider me premature, I trust.'

'Not the least likely.'

'Then I have been considering that, as possibly you will not wish for a very long engagement——'

'A month. Not a day more. A fellow feels unsettled with—with that sort of thing' (and others unnameable, unpaid bills to wit) 'hanging over him. I must make Sydney look at it in the same light, and fix the middle of July.'

'Then the middle of July will be a very expensive time to me, Rupert.'

Mr. Villiers barely restrained a chuckle. Of all moves on the board this was just

the most advantageous for him Mrs. Alwyn could have made. He had firmly resolved that, once turned Benedict, he would be a model of the order he was going to adorn; give up those little tricks and amusements that had led him into slippery places, cherish his wife, attach himself to his home, and never owe anybody anything any more! But the steps between the assumed ease of his present and the assured ease of his future were still precarious ones. Now he thanked his stars he had got the cue to cutting his difficulties short.

'A very expensive time!' he repeated, gravely. 'Ah, I suppose so. You ladies won't be contented, I presume, unless you have the ceremony in grand style.'

'Grand! Oh, dear no. But it must be becomingly. And you have no idea—men have not—that is one reason why I could not discuss this with the Major, though I

felt bound to speak of it to you—how expenses run up at such a time.'

'Ah! I haven't a doubt of it,' Rupert acquiesced. 'I've been thinking of pretty much the same sort of thing myself. You see, when a fellow gets married he has to clear up all round, as it were, and deucedly—I beg your pardon, Aunt Helen—confoundedly awkward he finds it sometimes. No joke, you know, to square everything up at one go, and rig himself out fresh from top to toe, as it were.'

'I quite believe it.'

'I'm glad you do. The pater, you see, droning away in his two rooms at Petersham, hasn't a notion of how much is wanted for this sort of thing; though'—with a twinge of compunction—'he quite intends coming down with all he can spare, and means to be liberal, of course. But figures run up so——'

'They do, indeed, Rupert.'

'And house-furnishing, to do the thing decently, makes off with ten times more than a man with my short income can get together. And—er, so—er——'

'Unquestionably, Rupert. But I am sure if this is put in the proper light to Sydney she will see that it is her duty, her delightful duty, to assist with what you name.'

'Oh, you think she won't object to that?'

'Certainly not. *If* explained as I should take care to explain it, were you to commission me to do so, Rupert. You would probably have to restrain her being too free-handed. But everything with her—forgive me the expression—peculiar disposition, depends on how the matter is put before her.'

'Then, my dear aunt, to be perfectly

candid, will you undertake to see if she has any objection to leaving a—a—thousand or so—a couple, perhaps, might be better—just loose, so as to start us off respectably with what my father gives us, too, and leave us a margin for—well, things we may not have thought of, any contingency that might crop up, you understand. 'Tisn't wise to have to feel hampered for a five-pound note the first year one is married.'

'Nor at any other time, Rupert!' A gentle reminder this that other interests were on the carpet besides his own. Mr. Villiers answered the helm instantly.

'Nor at any other. Dear me, no. Least of all at such a time as I hope we are coming to. I'm certain, Aunt Helen, Sydney and I would both think it unfair for you to bear the outlay that is for our glorification.'

'Especially as, you see, my income is on the verge of being lessened!'

'Exactly so. I should think if Sydney asked you to manipulate all her first quarter's income over the business, that wouldn't leave you much to the bad, would it?'

On the contrary, it would leave her, as she would arrange, an appreciable trifle to the good. Rupert was thoughtful beyond his sex. What an excellent husband he would make poor Sydney. Mrs. Alwyn felt quite a glow of regard for him, pleasant fellow that he was! She took his arm affectionately, with, 'That would do! That would do—' "amply," she was on the point of saying, but substituted, 'As I should contrive it.' There was no need to impress Rupert with the notion that he was acting very liberally. She preferred the obligation to rest with him. So she con-

cluded, 'And I will arrange that other point, Rupert; and take pains to settle it speedily, as you wish.'

'Thanks, very much.' It took a load off his mind, and he could add, with quite a cool air, 'Of course, you see why it is so desirable?'

'Perfectly.' ('Hang it, I hope not!' thought the gentleman.) 'And now, if we are to dine at eight, I think it time we went indoors, Rupert.'

He took off his straw hat with 'Then *au revoir*, mamma!' And profoundly contented with the compact just concluded, went gaily into the house, up to his own room three steps at a time, singing 'Love in her eyes sits playing,' so lustily over his quarter-of-an-hour's dressing that the persecuted sparrows outside had no chance of beauty sleep till he had descended to the drawing-room in that evening garb which,

if he might believe the testimony of many mirrors, invested him with his most gentlemanly and attractive exterior.

'Sydney not come!' he said, impatiently, on entering; and Leonora, the only occupant of the apartment, replied, rather sarcastically—for though all this exaltation of Sydney was needful means to a desirable end, she was getting thoroughly tired of it;—'No, actually not here yet, poor, *poor* Rupert. So you must wait a little longer before you can verify the charming ditty you have been waking up the echoes with so melodiously.'

'Laughing at me!' said Mr. Villiers, seating himself with resigned aspect by his fair cousin. The characteristics of kinship were strong between these two. He could play upon her moods as readily as she upon her cottage Collard. 'And when she knows how keenly sensitive

I am to feminine ridicule. Cruel, very! But Norah, my dear—pardon!'—as the young lady stiffened her rounded figure warningly—'I should say "my dear Norah," that's correct enough for cousins, isn't it?—remember two can indulge in these playful pleasantries. Permit me to inquire who may be the *toi* associated with the *moi* in the strains I had the happiness of listening to just now. Such impassioned vocalisation signifies something individual, not general. Benignly enlighten me, dear coz.'

'Nonsense!' said Leonora, a satisfied smile belying an ostentatious frown.

'Had it—now had that *toi* anything to do with a clerical scion of nobility? A gentleman in a soft wide-awake, who walked up from the village with you this morning?'

'Silence, Rupert!'

'And who had something so serious to discuss before separating, it involved five minutes' conversation, a great deal of deliberation, and a great many blushes!'

'Really, Rupert, this is intolerable! If I had known you were playing the spy——'

'Hard names, hard names, young people! Now, what's amiss?'

This was Mrs. Alwyn's question as she came rustling in.

'Nothing very bad, Aunt Helen. Only Leonora perversely declines to tell me what absorbed her and Mr. Duvesne this morning. And I consider that, as a near male relative on the spot, I ought to know it.'

'Then most inquisitive of men,' cried Leonora, her mother listening carefully, while pretending to laugh at them both, 'hear and believe! Mr. Duvesne was

asking nothing more important than my opinion about the hangings of a room.'

'Innocent enough,' said Mrs. Alwyn.

'That depends, Aunt Helen. What room, Cousin Norah?'

'Curiosity—your name is Rupert Villiers!' cried the young lady, nothing loth to be pushed to the extremity of confession. 'It was a—morning room. The pretty west one we noticed, mamma, when the rectory was building. Mr. Duvesne's study is just the opposite side of the vestibule.'

'*Elle et lui!* H'm. *Pour moi . . . pour toi!*' hummed Mr. Villiers, mischievously. 'And what colour wished "he," and what colour counselled "you," Cousin Norah?'

'Rupert, you are too absurd. Mr. Duvesne fancied pale pink, but I said at once that would go very badly with——'

'Squirrel-coloured hair!' audaciously flicking at her much-becurled coiffure.

'Pshaw! With the yellow red of sunset, Mr. Villiers. They mix most horribly. So I suggested pale blue, and Mr. Duvesne——'

'Coincided, of course! And right you are, Norah. Blue for you blondes, you know, all the world over!'

'Mamma, silence him! Tell him such badinage is very vulgar. It must be put a stop to. Positively I can't listen to it any longer!' cried Leonora, getting up with a maidenly display of affront.

'Well, here comes something to release you,' said Mrs. Alwyn. 'I heard wheels turning in at the gate, I think.'

Instantly Mr. Villiers was out and into the hall. His aunt followed more leisurely. Leonora was deserted, with a suspicious pout on her full lips and a keen

desire burning within her that her time to command such devoted alacrity might be nigh.

The spirit of fun animating Mr. Villiers the minute before was put to the right-about as he hastened to the porch, first to assist Sydney in descending from the carriage which had brought her and her fellow-traveller home. His attitude was, so nearly as he could make it, perfection for the occasion: a mixture of tender deference and lover-like impatience, calculated to set the stamp of surrender to himself on the 'impressionable' nature of his nearly betrothed. But whether absence had its proverbial effect, and whether the wonder-working little god were enthroned in his lady's eyes, the anxious gentleman was unable at once to judge. Sydney, having once seen who was advancing, kept her glance nervously

averted. Nor would she suffer him, as he desired, to clasp her fingers for a moment in the sheltering gloom of the porch. Instead, she loosed his arm, and went quickly to her mother, meeting her cool, self-contained welcome with a tremulous embrace that held an unspeakable depth of deprecation and emotion. So monstrous to the girl's generous instincts had seemed the harsh judgment of her mother's doings to which her first passionate outburst of humiliated pain had driven her, that now, as cheek lay to cheek, she felt a very Judas, yet, somehow, sorrier for her mother than herself. Her mother, after all!

Mrs. Alwyn was quick to mark disturbing signs, which she set down to weariness.

'I was very wrong,' she said, 'to let you take that journey—there and back—in

three days. You are dreadfully tired, Sydney?'

'Dreadfully.'

'You did not rest as you ought the day between.'

'Rest! Oh, no, mamma.'

The notion was so grotesque. Coming atop the long strain of cheerfulness kept up perforce before Mrs. Dacie, it fetched for answer a little cry, half laughter, nearer tears. A single soft syllable would have plunged Sydney into the yet unknown regions of hysteria. But from any such exhibition of weakness her mother's sharp promptitude shielded her.

'Ah, you are simply like all young people, not fit to be trusted out alone. Here, Phillips; take Miss Alwyn's bag upstairs and help her to dress. Posting about in the way you have been, you have had no regular meals, of course. Be quick

down to dinner, my dear. We waited for you.'

'Must I come—' Sydney began.

'Most certainly you must,' Mrs. Alwyn broke in, peremptorily. And conscious she must spend no strength on skirmishes, but save all for the battle royal close upon her, Sydney gave in; wearily changed travelling clothes for a dress that matched her pale face, and re-appeared to endure the ceremonial of four courses, with the best semblance of appetite she could command.

But it was not a successful dinner. Leonora, at one end of the table, looked, as she felt, a trifle petulant. Mrs. Alwyn, having made careless inquiry for Mrs. Dacie, dropped the journey and its object altogether, bestowing her spare minutes in ladylike vituperation of the Hemyngford

fishmonger, who had sent an inferior cut of salmon to that ordered.

'He knows, at this distance, I am at his mercy, and takes advantage accordingly!' said the irate hostess. 'Positively dishonest, I call it;' and Sydney winced. Rupert Villiers felt the minutes wasted. It was impossible to make love across a plateau of roses and jellies and wax-candles; with, moreover, a couple of lynx-eyed waiting-maids ready to make note—for kitchen gossip—of every soft word or expressive glance. And to Sydney, comparison of this, her delicate and elegant home, with Jacob Cheene's poor lodgings, rich only in what were banished here—relics of her father; sight of her mother's long white jewel-decked hands, diamond pins nestling in folds of Honiton upon her head, with remembrance of John Lewis's

toil, pain-wrung joints and poverty-stricken garments, these turned her so heart-sick that each minute seemed interminable. Involuntarily she breathed a heavy sigh as Rupert filled his claret-glass from the glittering silver jug, and he interpreted it according to his own desire.

'A hot dining-room is a bad place to shut you up in, Sydney, after six hours of railway carriages. It's a lovely night,' swallowing his wine, and walking off, with a gesture of permission from Mrs. Alwyn, to the long, open window at the end of the apartment; 'doesn't somebody say somewhere, "Methinks I will go forth and scent the new-mown hay." I think it would be a good notion to imitate. They've been cutting in the field opposite this afternoon. Sydney'—with an effective change of note, and momentary halt

upon her name—'won't you come out, too? It's just what you will like.'

She got up, a tinge of colour rising, and went to the window.

'Now,' he said, for her ear alone; 'you will come with me, by me, Sydney. Do! I have been wanting you—waiting for so long.'

He put all needful pleading in his tone. It sounded marvellously true. Would he stand by her now? And if he did——!

'May I get you a shawl?' he persuaded her. 'You must be taken care of, you know. You are a valuable person. You are coming?'

But that stray hint of value scared her.

'No,' she said, slowly, almost faintly; 'I dare—I cannot come now, indeed.'

'Too tired?' very softly.

'Yes. Too tired, Rupert.'

'Then you shall not be troubled.' The young man reckoned himself most chivalrously unselfish. To give him his due when, as now, he deemed himself secure of his end, his disposition was not unkindly. 'Aunt Helen, Sydney should sleep the clock round, to revive her from this jaunt. I am bidding her good-night.'

'Wise, I have no doubt,' said Mrs. Alwyn. 'Good-night, my dear,' as Sydney, returning, stooped over her. 'What? Will I not come to your room by-and-by? Certainly not. Gossiping at night is against my rules, and you must defer to them for a few more hours. To-morrow you are your own mistress, you know, and I suppose we must honour the occasion by letting you talk as you like and do as you like.'

So, shivering over this unusually complaisant forecast, Sydney was dismissed to

her slumbers; and Mr. Rupert, after a few minutes star-gazing by himself, put his head in, with,

'It's too agreeable out of doors for anyone to stay in. Suppose you venture out, and take a turn with me, Leonora? You won't mind a cigar?'

'Would you have asked Sydney to allow it, Cousin Rupert?' said she, pouting.

'Circumstances alter cases, Cousin Norah,' said he, taking out his Russia case, and thinking: 'She's over-old to pout, but it's uncommonly becoming to her!'

'Then suppose I don't come?' coquetted Leonora, attitudinising by the window-frame.

'Take me or leave me, as you will,' said the gentleman, resignedly, striking his match, and stepping out on the gravel.

'Then I'll be benevolent enough to take you,' she said, out of pity!' And stepped forth after him.

CHAPTER V.

SOME GRIEFS ARE MEDICIN'ABLE.

Mr. Villiers was down betimes next morning.

Knowing that Sydney was generally earliest to appear in the breakfast-room, he calculated on receiving her alone He had something in his waistcoat-pocket that he kept fingering, taking it out now and then to look at. A thick gold circlet, set with sapphires three. He had the words ready with which to offer this, and birth-day greetings, and—himself! He ran the

little speech through mentally half-a-dozen times while pacing to and fro in the fresh morning air, casting a glance each turn he took past the window to see if she for whom he waited had appeared. He felt the minutes tumultuous. Once over, he could get his breakfast without that awkward sensation of a screw propeller at work under his shirt-front. He could dash off a line to Tufter and sundry others fixing a day for——'

The door opened. 'Now for it!' thought he, and made one stride in. Check! It was Leonora!

Leonora in pale blue cambric, looking, for twenty-nine, quite youthful, as she stood with her back to the light, her brown locks rolled away in a tight knob, bathing fashion. Not hearing her cousin's step on the thick mat behind, she was bestowing all her attention on the arrangement of

some object by Sydney's plate. It was *her* birthday gift. Characteristic enough. A gilt-framed, tinted photograph of her own fair self in sumptuous array. Square bodice deep cut, pearls on the wide display of bosom, golden coils well-nigh the only covering of the well-posed arms, face raised just enough to give the stately curve of the neck and catch the upward tilt of the eyelashes, folded hands resting on a tall flower-vase so as to conceal no undulation of the handsome figure. It was certainly the likeness of a very good-looking person, and the original, contemplating it with blandest satisfaction, felt half sorry she was going to part from it. None of fashion's beauties whom she had seen could compare with it to her mind. Fashion's beauties! Ah!—with an audible 'Heigho!'—was the day coming, how close was it, when some society paper, perchance, would go forth

bearing her lineaments to the upper ten thousand, her name above, not an unwed belle, her signature below, not Leonora Villiers! 'Heigho!' said she again, and gave a great start when her cousin, advancing, echoed her jocosely.

'What mean those plaintive sounds, Leonora *mia?* Are you wishing it were your twenty-first birthday over again, and you were going to have all sorts of good things given to you?'

'Indeed no, Rupert. I am not the very least envious of Sydney in—any respect. I suppose I sighed because I want my breakfast.'

'Creditable subterfuge, if not correct answer. Well, I've been sighing here the last half-hour because I want—my breakfast! Is Sydney taking my injunction literally and going to sleep the clock round before she comes down?'

'When she does we shall have to wait for mamma,' answered Leonora, demurely. 'But take comfort, dear cousin, they won't be long. I heard mamma call Sydney into her boudoir just as I came down, to give her some lace, and a lecture, I presume. This'—indicating the picture—'is what I have got for her. Do you think she will like it?'

'She must,' said Mr. Villiers; 'that goes without saying. I do.'

'Which,' returned Leonora, with a droop of her red lips, 'is a perplexing arrangement of sentences. Am I to infer that because you like it—or say so—Sydney must do the same? And do you expect my step-sister's opinion invariably to mould itself sweetly to yours, good cousin?'

'Oh, I've no fears on that point!' replied Mr. Villiers, thinking with amuse-

ment, 'Ah, charming Norah, you are disposed to be spiteful, are you?'

'Then I hope you may find you've no need for them,' said she, drily. 'Oh, here comes mamma,' looking through the open door up the hall. 'Sydney reserves herself, *à la première danseuse*, for the last to-day, to be received with united honours. Why, mamma, what is the matter?'

She might well ask. Mrs. Alwyn entered with a rapid sweep; storm on her brow; extremest paleness, underlying a skilful application of pearl powder, making her almost ghastly; the grand dame completely lost in the angry woman. Pushing-to the door, she cut short Mr. Villiers' salutation, and throwing herself into a chair, panted, locking and unlocking her hands in an abandonment of violent agitation.

'Aunt Helen,' exclaimed Rupert Villiers, while Leonora ran to the bell: sal volatile must be wanted; 'are you ill? Or what on earth has happened?'

'Ah! what, indeed? Why—' cried Mrs. Alwyn, turning on him with an almost ferocity that made him fall back a step; 'why, what never would have happened at all, Rupert—don't ring, Leonora; Phillips is not to come in—never at all, if you had let me follow my own senses and stop Sydney from going on that crazy journey! I knew no good would come of it. Now, you'll see what you have done for yourself—for Sydney—for all of us! Oh, it's enough to drive a woman wild!'

'My dear aunt,' Rupert began, soothingly, but she flung a snarl at him with, 'Don't, Mr. Villiers! Don't speak to me!

Not to *me!* If you've any persuasion in you, any reason, any influence, go and exert them on Sydney. Tell her I shall never forgive her; not '—with a tempest-clap of ironical laughter—'that she will mind that! Tell her she'll break your heart, Rupert, invent any plea you choose, but, for mercy's sake, put an end to this mad idea, or I can't tell what will come to us all. Go to her, pray. I said I should send you. Leonora, my poor, poor darling, get me some water.'

Profoundly puzzled and disturbed, Mr. Villiers needed no urging, but went, as he was bidden, to the boudoir. Not too quickly, for he wanted to arm himself with some clue to this sudden turmoil before entering. What was the mad idea that was to be the undoing of them all? Another love? Another engagement? That was all he could imagine. Some-

thing beneath her? Not likely, with Sydney's temperament, but women are ungain cattle, he thought, with a sudden spice of savageness, in affairs of the heart. Once Mrs. Alwyn had said something of a man called Drayton. Was he at the bottom of this hullaballoo? Had not he, himself, Rupert, been hot enough in his siege? By George, he vowed, with the peach so near his lips he wouldn't lose it now; at any rate, not for want of warm wooing! So with the bristling front of impatient fervour he prepared to fight tooth and nail for his own—interests—and thus entered Sydney's presence.

She seemed waiting for him, and met his first gaze of questioning entreaty with a bearing incomprehensible in its blending of womanly firmness with girlish tremor.

'My dear, dearest Sydney,' he exclaim-

ed, offering to grasp both her hands—he was ready to take her to his arms even, the bolder the attack the better now!—but she repulsed him with a blush that was not unkind, and asked, looking up most wistfully,

'Have you heard, Rupert? And do you——'

'I have heard,' he interrupted, 'only that you have been frightening Aunt Helen with some fancy that is to upset us all. But I can't have that, you know!' (with a masterly softening of tone. She could never keep her eyes on him like this if there were another man in the case. He breathed again.) 'Come,' essaying to draw her to the sofa, 'tell me what it all means, my—dearest. I may say that, may I not?'

'Wait,' she said, and freeing herself, took a chair close by. 'Rupert, I wish

mamma had told you everything. But you do know about my father's money going, do you not—all of it?'

'Yes. All but your mother's and yours, luckily.' What was she driving at?

'All but ours. Hers and mine. Luckily, I suppose; or I might never have been able to do what I shall now. For did you know too, Rupert, that many people—very poor ones—had lent papa their money, and—and have never had it back from then till now?'

He caught a glimpse of her intention, and resolved instanter to treat it as untenable.

'Well, yes, I think I know what you are alluding to,' he said, assuming carelessness: 'but, of course, all that unfortunate business was wound up ages ago. All these great smashes, you know,

mines and banks, and so forth, involve a lot of little interests. It never can be helped. You must not think of concerning yourself about it. How came you to hear of it even ?'

'It was chance, or'—looking beyond him, with what he silently dubbed a fanatical sort of resolve, that made him very uncomfortable—'or something wiser that took me among these very people on Wednesday. So I know all about them. And the money that is mine to-day is just a very little over the bare sums they lent. So, Rupert, I am going to pay it to them.'

'Sydney. Impossible!'

She watched him while she unfolded her plan. Now her spirit sank and her head drooped.

'Ah!' she said, 'I was afraid you would think so.'

'Afraid!' he exclaimed, getting up ex-

citedly. 'Why, my dear—why, Sydney, you must have known what I should think —what I should say. It's only what any man, short of an idiot, would say, let alone anyone who cares for your welfare; who cares for you as I do! Listen to me:' halting before her, 'I do assure you occurrences like these are as common as—as ditchwater. Your father's business was purity itself compared with most failures. These people you talk about ought to have watched their own interests better than they did. But for them to go and rake up their grievances, and impose them on you now!—for you to dream of stripping yourself penniless on their behalf! why, it isn't to be thought of for an instant. It would be most preposterous absurdity.'

'It would be common honesty.'

'No, no. You are not a judge of these worldly matters. I tell you we can't allow

it. You must not do it. Sydney, you shall not!'

'But, Rupert, I will.'

He had overshot the mark. Sydney stood up, too, confronting him. The colour ebbed from her face, but her clear eyes and her mouth were resolute, in what she fully now discerned was to be a double sacrifice. Mr. Villiers was beside himself with an anger he dared not give vent to. He walked from her, frowning, and stood at the window, staring moodily out.

'I thought it was just possible,' she said, sadly, 'that you might have sided with me. But I see now, I ought not to have expected it.'

'It seems,' he answered, almost roughly, 'we have all been expecting things we are not likely to get!'

'Ah, it does!' Her accent was so sorrowful that Mr. Villiers's fit of mortifica-

tion, on his own behalf, suddenly yielded to a wave of other impulse. He turned about. She was young. A most fair woman. The one his imagination had dwelt on for months as his very own. This project must be overthrown. He *would* have her!

He went to her again very gently.

'Pardon me now for speaking as I had no right. But if you followed your most generous wish, Sydney, don't you know what you would do besides grieving your mother terribly, and putting her—little as you intend it—putting her unjustly to much pain? Why, you would be treating me cruelly. For you must have seen what I have been wanting to tell you for weeks, what I was going to tell you this morning, surely, as well as if I had said it. You are not going to cast away what I was going to offer, just that you may carry out

the scheme of one day's surprise. Are you, Sydney dear?'

Such a void was there in her life—in her heart. She bent to the tender note as young bud-laden branches sway before the whisper of the spring's south wind.

'Oh! must it be one or the other?' she cried. And Rupert Villiers caught at a method of hedging out of the dilemma.

'See now,' he ventured, 'how would this do? Make me your almoner. Let me take—if you are bent on liberality—a thousand pounds, and give it among these people. A douceur they have no shadow of right to expect, and ought to be grateful to you for ever for. Then we—you and I, Sydney—would contrive to be satisfied with the rest. Say "yes" to this, and put an end to all this trouble, and give me leave to be happy!'

She moved away from his offered caress.

'Rupert, I should neither feel myself a wife worthy any man's love, nor a daughter worthy of my dear, dead father's, if I did say "yes,"' she answered. 'So, if it needs five thousand pounds, or three, or one, to buy me a place in your home, why, I must go without it.' She stopped herself sharply in a sob. What woman feels no sting in the discovery, that it is her purse, and not herself, that is coveted? 'And you can be—easily, perhaps—happy without me.'

'Good heavens! Sydney, you are obstinate enough to drive a man mad!'

'I cannot alter.'

'Would you expect me to take you to some hovel of a home——'

'No, I expect nothing of the sort.'

'And there vegetate on my salary!'

'Rupert, I have made you angry. Forgive me, and leave me.'

But the baffled suitor was overboiling now with disappointed rage, and coarsely gave it rein.

'Would you expect me to marry on my own beggarly pittance, and rear up a brood of paupers——'

'Mr. Villiers. Go!'

She gave her order as still as a statue. Only her bosom, not her voice, upraised. He could have bitten his tongue out for the lapse the moment it was uttered. But there was no quarter in her attitude. He dared not disobey. He turned slowly on his heel, and went.

In the room below, Mrs. Alwyn, calmer, much eau-de-Cologned and sal-volatilled, met him with,

'Well, Rupert, well? What's to be done?'

'Nothing,' he answered, sullenly; 'but to get our breakfasts. Then I may as well

go and meet my father. Leonora, here's something I've no use for now. If you care for such gew-gaws, take it.'

He tossed the sapphire ring across the table, and then the three sat down to anything but a lively meal.

An hour later Mr. Villiers went off to Hedyngham to fetch the Major, damping his cheery, 'Well, may I wish you many happy returns of the day, my boy?' with a surly, 'No, you may not, sir.' And disclosing on the return drive the source of this miserable fiasco.

Astounded at the tidings, the old officer could only repeat, 'Bless my heart! I never heard such a thing, never! To think John Alwyn's obligations should turn up just now, and his child saddle herself with them like this. Bl—e—ss—my—heart!' till finding that these ejaculatory minute-guns only increased his son's

irritation, he held his peace while the last two miles were bringing him to his interview with Mrs. Alwyn.

That sorely-tried lady received him with overflowing tears, and plunged into her afflictions even as she shook hands.

'Now, Major Villiers, you see what Sydney is. Now you will find the difficulty, the impossibility of dealing with her disposition. Against my will, as she must well have known, though, unhappily, I let poor Rupert over-rule me, she went off on that silly sentimental expedition. Without my leave she must needs go further, forsooth, and hear some man's whining farrago, which, instead of coming home to have explained, she prefers investigating, through that most impertinently interfering Mr. Cheene. And this is the upshot. She takes her destiny into her own hands, Major Villiers. Well, let her. She deliber-

ately impoverishes herself. She is wilful, wilful, to the verge of wickedness. My only consolation is, come what may, the work is none of mine!'

Knowing, as he did, the domestic drama from its first scenes, and strongly disposed, spite of his disappointment, to view the culprit's conduct as condonable, if not justifiable, the Major took this accusing tirade in silence. It went sorely against him to join forces for a moment against an absent minority, that minority, one solitary girl, spending her worldly all to redeem her father's name.

'Suppose I go and speak to Sydney myself,' he volunteered, 'and see if I can win her to look at things differently.

'Oh, by all means go, Major!' his hostess cried. 'But as to moving her. H—f!' expressively, 'as well expect to stop the wind from blowing.'

And so, indeed, he found it, not altogether—lightly be it written, for he never dared confess as much from that day to this!—to his dissatisfaction. Saving a cup of luke-warm coffee, brought unordered, Sydney had taken little enough now for a long wearing stretch, and, though sick and faint, she hailed his coming not only fearlessly, but gladly. She let him in very sober argument go over the whole ground of contest, point out how absolutely she would alienate herself from comfort at home, probably from all chances of prosperity in any quarter; how Quixotic her conduct would sound to the world, how unlooked-for her money was by these statute-run creditors, and, therefore, 'how unnecessary—er—as they're not expecting anything, don't you see, my dear, what a pity—as it were, to—to open old wounds——'

'What! Even to try and heal them!' she said, her pale face irradiating with something that made it better far than lovely. 'Do you recollect, did you ever know, Major Villiers, what sort of people they are I want to make amends to?'

'Not exactly,' he confessed. 'Mr. Russel told me at the time of an effort to get at some of your mother's settlement on behalf of some individuals, but she—but it was resisted. And if I had known every single case I couldn't have given up a penny of the trust-money. That could only be dealt with by principals.'

As it is going to be.'

Then Sydney told him simply who 'her creditors' were. The old, the poor, the struggling, trusting, defenceless. 'And now,' she said, looking steadfastly at him through the heavy drops gathering in her eyes, 'will you tell me, quite truly, Major

Villiers, if you think I do well or ill to pay them?'

And the poor Major, without so much as a cartridge left, could only brush, he *said*, the midges off his face with his big Indian silk handkerchief, and argue,

'Still, my dear child, have you realised how this will leave you? Why, with fifty or sixty pounds, no more! And suppose your mother doesn't—doesn't smooth down for awhile. You'll be dependent on her, you know. She'll feel that unfair, I'm afraid——'

'I won't let her,' Sydney cried. The truth was bitter though, and made her falter. 'Mamma shall not be burdened with me. I ought to be worth my salt somewhere to some one. If God helps those who help themselves, Major Villiers, then I won't be afraid. I think He will help me.'

There was no urging argument past this. The Major went presently down, getting rid of more midges by the way, to his son, of whom, and his discarded suit, he had not ventured to speak to Sydney. But now, joining the young man in a gloomy promenade up and down the fir walk, he said, with some of that enthusiasm stigmatised by Mrs. Alwyn as unbusiness-like,

'My boy, sooner than give up that girl, I'd take her without a farthing, if I were in your shoes, and could get her. She's a woman of a thousand!'

'But as she also happens to be a woman without a thousand, she is not the one for me, sir,' returned Rupert, sulkily. He had pitied himself into a perfect slough of exasperation against the headstrong young marplot. 'I don't forget what the proverb says, "When poverty comes in at the door, love flies out of the window."'

'Ah, but there need be nothing that young folks like you two ought to call poverty at your door, my lad. Not if the hundreds I've put by can stave it off. If the love is only there to begin with, I'd marry her as soon—sooner than ever. I would, upon my honour, Rupert!'

'Then I think it's well for the future of both of us that my head is cooler than yours, sir,' was the ungracious response to this. With his hands crammed down in his coat-pockets, the young gentleman marched abruptly off by a side path, and his father saw that further persuasion would be vain.

Each man felt awkward, out of place at The Dale any longer, and both left by evening. The younger, still steeped in self-commiseration, vouchsafed no message of farewell to Sydney. The elder sought her out, and said good-bye full as patern-

ally as if the darling scheme he had been cherishing were nigh fulfilment. 'However matters turn out,' he said, 'if ever you want anything that I can give, don't be above asking it. You know where to find me.'

He was thinking that some of pusillanimous Mr. Rupert's intended wedding fund might be of service to the girl. Alas, before London was reached he had discovered that must go in another direction. For the son, wisely calculating that the flare of the day's conflagration would cast his private peccadilloes into shadow, made a clean breast of debts, I O U's included, as they travelled up, and clumsily shouldering the farewell sins of bachelorhood on the design just broken off, secured a promise of clearing-up that emptied the Major's reserve fund, to the last note.

Before night closed around The Dale,

Mrs. Alwyn had another interview with Sydney, and gave her the result of twelve hours' meditation on her conduct.

'Looked at in every light, you are doing me, your sister, and yourself a gross injury. What course you will take I am too frightfully upset to contemplate. But this I warn you, Sydney. The fortune I had secured when I married your father, then old enough to be my father'—pausing, that her daughter might recognise the unequal bargain—'I consider Leonora's. Pray don't deceive yourself into expectation of sharing it.'

'I will not, mother.'

'As for your home, if you consider you ought to diminish, by sharing it, your sister's provision and mine, for a month or six weeks, do so. But, plainly, I tell you, you ought by then to find means of maintaining yourself. I have one thing to beg, to

insist on. I will not have all this business, which I have laboured for your sake and Leonora's to keep concealed, bruited now about the parish.'

'I will speak of it to no one.'

'It might ruin Leonora's prospects, as you have contrived to let it ruin your own. And, another thing. I will not have the bearer of my name publicly place-hunting. You, who can do so much for your father, must do this for your mother. Wherever you earn your living, drop the name of Alwyn, I beg for the time being. Don't disgrace me by open association with paid labour.'

Sydney bent her head, her heart for a moment too full for speech. But as Mrs. Alwyn would have rustled off to her own room, she stayed her, a hand pleadingly upon her shoulder.

'Mother, I am but trying to do the

best I can with what I have while it is mine.' (Robert Vaughan's lesson, well learnt, well learnt!) 'Some day you may take my wilfulness less hardly. Do kiss me.'

Even in her white heat of anger Mrs. Alwyn could not refuse: but she went forth, her handkerchief to her eyes, and took revenge on sentiment by—wondrous to relate—snubbing Leonora!

That young lady, however, least ruffled of all the household, reflected calmly, as she put her sapphire ring beside her other jewels, that it was an ill wind that blew no one any good. She had got a present, after a kind, and, while people had been hanging about in consultation indoors, she had enjoyed, when strolling about the lawn, a brief meeting with Mr. Edward Duvesne. He had betrayed some nervousness—suggestive sign! Had wished

to see Mrs. Alwyn particularly. Hoped he should fortunately find her disengaged some early day.

Which meant——?

Leonora smiled serenely, as, after gazing affectionately at her portrait, she wrapped the flattering semblance carefully up and laid it away. It was lucky, after all, she had not given it to poor, ridiculous Sydney. It would be ready now for some one else. 'Oh, silly, silly Sydney,' she thought, with her last yawn, 'she would soon have to be going somewhere, as mamma said, and where would that be!'

In the next room that question was in its first stage of solution.

Sydney, sleepless, had turned out the few contents of her travelling bag, among them a scrap of paper that came upon her as a messenger, she would fain hope, of

good. And before she lay down to rest a note was written, signed with her first initials only, to one Miss Hurst, far off in the western county.

CHAPTER VI.

'COURAGE MOUNTETH WITH OCCASION.'

THAT The Dale during the next few days was anything but the abode of cheerfulness is a fact requiring little imagination to paint.

To Sydney Mr. Villiers' prompt desertion was a realistic comment on the course she had taken, such as might have purchased some women's repentance and possible recantation. But having put her hand to the plough, the last thing on earth to turn the girl back would have been personal suffering, had that been ten

times sharper than what she had to bear. But sharp and cruel as this was, tempting her to disbelief that love and trust could ever re-enter her life, the keenest venom of the last sting lay in the fact that she had been too willing to grasp at the semblance of affection, too ready to read the ways of the wooer by the light of her own wishes! Or thus she thought, laying the scourge of self-chastisement across her heart, so bruised and sore already, and every spark of dignity within her flew ablaze at the affront she conceived herself to have courted by taking for pure gold what was but poorest dross. In the despair of mortification she planted her foot with a pride (that most truly did feel pain) on every tender remembrance or emotion, and strove with all her might to count her love well lost. Chill, bleak, was her outlook now, the sole ray of light among her many

clouds, the firm belief that, even as her father would have had her, she was doing well, come what might.

Beyond the house for days she would not stir. Mary Dacie for one would soon trace trouble in her bearing, and would scarcely be satisfied without searching into that whereon she had promised silence. A line to the Gate House (shown, before sent, to her mother's jealous eyes) bade them not wonder at her absence, she had so much to busy her at home; and the long summer hours Sydney passed in setting her possessions in order, ready for whatever might come next.

Leonora, meanwhile, regarded her with a mixed pitying amazement and slightly supercilious kindness that was far from soothing.

'To think,' said this young lady to her step-sister, whom she watched working,

herself lazily swaying in a rocking-chair, enjoying the *dolce far niente* of a hot afternoon, 'to think you should go, Sydney, and give up quite a respectable income, that would have always kept you decently, and dressed you—oh, really remarkably well! I wouldn't have done it if I had been you!'

The asseveration was so sincere it fetched a smile to Sydney's grave face.

'If you had been in my stead, Leonora, you might have acted the same!'

'Never!' very emphatically. 'Of course, it's done and can't be undone, but I'm really very sorry for you, Sydney. I wish you had not been so frightfully foolish. You will find it very disagreeable after living here so nicely to go down and be a sort of common person. I don't expect you have half thought of that.'

'I don't expect I have.'

'People who have money, you know, are treated very differently from those who have not, Sydney. You will find that out.'

'I have found it out already.'

'A—h!' prolonging the interjection. 'Yes, so you have. And do you know you'll most assuredly be sorry some day you drove Rupert from you? Poor fellow!'

'We will not talk of that, Norah, please,' said Sydney, terse only because a great qualm of rebellious weakness threatened self-command; and gathering her work together, she silently went away.

'Angry with me for interfering, I suppose, as usual,' deplored Leonora to her mother; 'though I spoke mildly enough, and only for her good. But Sydney will never leave off being headstrong.'

This ultimatum Mrs. Alwyn fully

endorsed, and resigned herself to illness as its result. Appearing downstairs only at luncheon and dinner, she spent the time dejectedly in the boudoir above, word going forth to servants and callers that neuralgia necessitated this seclusion. To Sydney she accorded a mournful civility that implied '*you* shall have nothing to complain of, however you have made me suffer!' And with scrupulous politeness when they met at table she would offer her peccant daughter a share of each separate viand, though the tone in which she would ask, 'Do you wish for *butter*, Sydney?' would seem to say that on the insane course she had chosen it was her duty to discard all luxuries, butter included!

Mr. Russel's opinion of his niece arrived in due course. Mrs. Alwyn handed her brother's letter in its uncompromising frankness to Sydney. The writer made

no attempt to mince matters: 'For you see,' he said to Major Villiers, who went down to Hampshire to talk the position over with his co-trustee, 'you can afford to side with her if you like. She's no relation of yours. But she is of mine. And I don't hesitate to call her a fool!'

Which sentiment he expressed very candidly in his epistle, 'though,' as he wound up, 'there is very little use in my saying this, for we are well aware, and Sydney is equally aware, no one can stop her if she chooses to persist in this insane folly. I must only beg you to explain to her that she is not to count on legacies from me or my wife. Maria's relatives will have most of what I have got. The rest to those who know how to take care of it, which Sydney doesn't. Please to inform her that the sum to which she is entitled will be placed

in the London and County by the 18th prox. The transfer from stock I can manage myself, as I often deal in this sort of thing. The usual per centage I shall, of course, deduct.'

Thus delivered himself Mr. Russel, the excellent man of all trades, though gentleman of no profession, who, in his alacrity to turn an honest penny, did not disdain the picking from his young relative's misfortunes. And as if to prove herself true to the strain, Mrs. Alwyn observed querulously, as the letter was returned without remark,

'I hope you are not forgetting that you are indebted to me, Sydney? It would be a curious honour, indeed, which would lead you to repay strangers' debts you never incurred, and let your own mother be loser of what she most unguardedly lent you! Of course those twenty pounds are gone.'

'Not quite, mamma,' came the answer, very low, for bitterness and sadness were having about an even tussle in the speaker's breast just then; 'I have a little left—enough to—take me away. And I will soon hand back the rest I—owe you.'

She went that same Wednesday, as the sun's heat was moderating, by lanes and field paths to Hedyngham, there found a letter she was expecting addressed merely to the post-office of the little town, and read it as she went back to St. Clairs by the same unfrequented way.

The rector, strolling beyond his garden, Virgil in hand, saw her coming, pre-occupied enough to have passed him in the gloaming, had he not greeted her with,

'Well met again! We are perplexed, Miss Sydney, as to what you have been

doing with yourself of late. Halt now. I am wanting to hear your latest news.'

'And I am wanting to tell it—all I can. Mr. Vaughan, did you tell the boys I meant to give them watches these next holidays?'

'Tell them? No.'

'Oh, thank you.'

'Thank me? Why?'

'Because I cannot do what I thought I would. I have not changed my mind one bit, but things are altered.'

'Altered, Sydney? How?' noticing even in the waning light that her features wore a very different aspect from when he had last seen them, lit up with gladness, in the church porch.

'In this way. You remember what you said to me of riches——'

'And their flying away? Yes.'

'Well, mine flew the very moment their

wings were fledged. And all my plans flew with them.'

'My poor child! Why, how——'

'No, hush! And, if you please, ask nothing. I did use them as you said I ought while I had them. And that is all I can tell. I wish I could have let you hear the whole. But I cannot, though I should go away happier.'

'Go away?'

'Yes, very soon. Without, perhaps, seeing you again, leaving so much I had meant to do undone! But I'm not to talk of it. It's best for every one I should not. This much even I can only say to you—my spiritual counsellor.'

'And your spiritual counsellor repeats it to none,' the rector answered, discerning the seriousness of deep anxiety below the would-be jest. Then he let her walk by him with but few words till his garden

was regained, where she could only make a bad attempt at thanking him for years of countless kindnesses, midway in which she broke down into an all but speechless farewell, and hurried away towards home.

'Is there a ban upon my pupils?' the master thought, watching the slender figure out of sight. Then with a sigh, turning indoors, 'First—one, and now this other seem to come into deep waters. And both, I should have arrogantly claimed, as fit as any for the best things the world had to give. I wonder how old I shall have to be before the truth is driven into me that One above knows best!'

Late in to dinner, Sydney followed her mother upstairs to explain her absence.

'I have done as you wished, mamma. I have found a place where I can earn some sort of living. Will you wish me to go directly?'

'I wish!' exclaimed Mrs. Alwyn. 'Have I a single wish on such an unnatural proceeding! It is no wish of mine, Sydney, but your own grievous obstinacy that takes you away. Who are the people, and where is the place?' leaning back, her glasses dangling down unused, a fan over her eyes.

'It is a lady to whom I wrote. I travelled with her last week. By accident she told me she was wanting a companion, and now she is willing to let me go for a time. I shall be paid only a little, but enough to get on with if I suit her.'

'If! Yes, and if you do not! What then?'

'Well, then, mamma,' fighting bravely to keep hopeful, 'I must do as many and many before me have done. People have had to trust in Providence——'

Mrs. Alwyn flung up her hands and

brought her eyebrows into an acute angle. She had no intention of being blasphemous, but the contempt she contrived to pour into her answer was worthy of an unblushing atheist.

'Providence, Sydney! Providence! If I had wanted proof of your appalling wrong-headedness, I have it now, when I hear you adopting the slang of a canting pauper! There, go on.' Fanning herself rapidly. 'This state of things will drive me demented. Pray go wherever you choose. What is the name of the person who takes you?'

'It is Miss Hurst, of Wynstone, in Herefordshire, mamma.'

Mrs. Alwyn looked up with a start of angry fright.

'You remembered my injunction about your own name? This woman may be a connection of people who once knew us.

Hursts abound in that part of England. For you, Sydney Alwyn, to be known as living in a species of service might prove an injury to Leonora, who is, at least, unoffending. Never forget that, Sydney, unless you desire to be malicious.'

'I have not forgotten it, mother. I never will. Shall I leave here on Saturday?'

'If you are determined on going, on all that leads to your going, yes.'

So, daring to make no general adieux, with no time to spare for nursing grief, Sydney made ready to depart. On the last evening she ventured a brief visit to the Gate House, where her puzzled friends had missed her sorely.

'And now going out again, do you say?' cried the doctor, after his wife's *bonâ-fide* improvement had been gladly vaunted. 'Why, how restless you've turned all on a

sudden. And pray how long are you intending to neglect us, and what are we to do without you?'

Questions these that went nigh to drown the phrases Sydney had prearranged to quench curiosity. Answer died on her lips. Mary saw in her pallor something that escaped the elder folks' notice, and filled the pause.

'She must come back to us as much her own usual self as mamma is now!'

'Ah, and tell us,' said Mrs. Dacie, patting her hand, 'when we are all to set about making wedding favours. I wanted to hear that the last night we were at Cheddeley, but her head ached so when she came back from Lutterthorpe, she could hardly talk at all. But I'll be bound you will have settled all that by the time when you come home again, my dear.'

Mary saw the girl's face changing, now flushed, now white.

'Perhaps,' the doctor cried, 'the naughty lassie means to steal a march, and get it all settled *before* she comes home, Molly! And we are to say a long good-bye to Miss Alwyn.'

Another word, her self-restraint must have snapped asunder. She got up with a laugh, marvellously close on tears. 'Right, Dr. Dacie, of course. I am eloping, undoubtedly. The chaise and postillion are waiting by now, so I must be off! Fare ye well.'

But Mary kept her arm about her to the outer door, whispering,

'There is something wrong, Sydney,' (Concerning that Mr. Villiers, she thought; loving him less than ever.) 'But you will write about it to me?'

'As soon—if ever—I can,' faltered Sydney, avoiding those pleading glances by a close hug. 'And if you don't hear, even

for a long time, don't be frightened or angry with me. Oh, if'—with a more passionate outburst of regret than she had ever spent on herself—'if only I had done something for you all before I went!'

'We owe you too much now,' Mary checked her quickly, tightening her arm round Sydney's waist, as they went down the old-fashioned path between great gleaming patches of scented pinks. 'Can I pay back nothing by sharing whatever pain you have now? I know there is something. Am I to be no good to you?'

'Not this time, Mary. For,' stopping to measure how much could be said without forfeiting her word, 'for the difficulty lies between mamma and me, so no one can take part in it but ourselves. It is,' slowly, weighing each syllable, 'that I am doing something she—dislikes. And I—won't give it up. Don't name it to her,

Mary. It would do no good. And ask me nothing more. It would be only friendly cruelty.'

Mary felt panic-stricken. Here was a complication that forbade inquiry, and drove her back on the old urging.

'But you will write then, and give me your address?'

Sydney hesitated, finding, for the first time in her life, what entanglements follow on a first concealment. To admit herself going among strangers, discarding her full name, was impossible. There was only one road out of the dilemma, and that she took.

'I might offend mamma doubly by giving my direction to you, Mary. So, when I write, it shall be through her, and I will ask her to send me your answers back. Oh, how I shall want to hear of you! And, Mary, if some one—if Mr. Drayton

should come here, tell me directly, will you?'

Mary Dacie's touch trembled as she stroked the head now resting on her shoulder. 'I will tell you of him if he comes. Do you want him to return then?'

'Oh, I do! Badly! If only he came, as I know he meant, I think my troubles would half vanish. And when you see him you must be very kind to him.'

'For her sake!' Mary Dacie thought, giving with her farewell the promise that for long dogged her slumbers like a nightmare. For what could dispute with Mrs. Alwyn mean but rejection of Rupert Villiers? What that rejection but preference for another, that other Richard Drayton? He worthy of Sydney, Sydney of him, who was she to come between them? Why, if she were not traitor to the girl companion who had brightened so many

hours through so many years, she must foster all chances of happiness for these two, and yield herself fully to that solitary state, never positively unpalatable till the rector's quondam pupil had visited St. Clairs last summer. A straight enough highway of simple propriety lay before her. Along it the doctor's daughter prepared, in all sober fidelity, to trudge, though it was like journeying from sunshine into night.

Betimes next morning Sydney quitted The Dale, home of nigh all rememberable days, and started on new seas, horizon limitless, ultimate haven unknown. Of her mother and sister she took briefest leave in their own rooms, and Phillips only, who could make neither head nor tail of what had been going on this last week, now watched her pale young lady departing alone with a shrewd suspicion of something very queer afloat.

Quickly, before the dew was off the hedge-rows, St. Clairs, with its wide, flat meadows, sleepy stream, and church-crowned, straggling village, was left far behind. Dreamlike the swift retracing of last week's expedition, 'twixt when and now years seemed to have rolled. By afternoon, Cheddeley was passed. A rose she recollected in bud upon the station fence was only just full blown. Why, seasons might have come and gone since she last saw it! The longer route by Stillcote she had chosen, just for a sight of Jacob Cheene and the 'God speed' of his faithful goodwill. As the old man stood the four waiting minutes beside her carriage, eyeing her with a sort of timid fear lest her valiant purpose should be giving way, or she bowed down beneath it, she told him that all was going well, and the promised funds would reach him soon from Major

Villiers. Then, when Jacob could send her word it was portioned out aright, she should be happier and so thankful to him.

'Mind, it is "a friend" who pays it back,' she begged. 'That is enough for any to know, and, Jacob, the "friend" is changed into Miss Grey, my mother desires it so, and she goes to dwell here,' giving him the address, 'where, if she behaves well enough to stay, you must render up accounts to her. What are you looking at?'

'Th—the—this! Only this!' he answered, with some confusion, carefully putting up the paper she had given him. 'I used to know the name—once.'

'My mother said the same. But it may be only chance. Anyhow as Sydney Grey I shall not'—her lips involuntarily curving sadly at the dread, 'disgrace any belonging to me.'

'Disgrace!' the old clerk began—but the train was gliding on. He could only, hat in hand, bid her good-bye, and then turn townward, saying, slowly, 'Hurst, Hurst. Ay, it's best, indeed, then, that she should be Miss Grey.'

With evening Sydney reached her destination, Capel Moor, high, wooded, three parts encircled by a rushing river, on whose thickly-foliaged banks masses of crags stood forth like sentries.

Then, with the end of her present wandering in view, came the fear of excessive weariness, the fall of spirits too long forced. As she made the last mile afoot, through scenes entirely strange, the full sense came upon her that St. Clairs was lost, no other certainty attained. For a minute her heart fainted within her. Then out from the clear amber sky gleamed one bright star. She took it for an omen, and

thanked God. The lad who was her guide and porter cried out from the rear, 'This be Wynstone, miss.' Another instant, and the homely features of last week's acquaintance met her at a porch covered with almond-scented 'traveller's joy.' She was bidden welcome, brought into a room where light from the western sky still lingered. There a tall figure stood as if waiting her. 'My brother Gilbert,' said Miss Hurst, with a nervous gesture of explanation; and Sydney recognised one whose blind loneliness had moved her pitying help ten days before.

CHAPTER VII.

MISS GREY'S NEW DUTIES.

SYDNEY had speculated at different points of her journey on who the 'us' of Miss Hurst's communication signified. Would there be a Mrs. Hurst, superannuated perhaps, since this daughter appeared the moving agent of the household, and deaf, very likely, since the letter which had engaged her had laid stress on her capabilities of reading aloud several hours each day; or would there be other sisters, invalid, maybe; or a father, very old, perchance? That she would like best of all,

and the brief glimpse of male equipments on the small hall-stand had given this fancy a momentary prominence, now swept entirely away.

Whether to be glad or sorry, in the surprise of this recognition, she hardly knew, nor had she time to think whether the former meeting were best acknowledged or not. The feeling uppermost she spoke.

'I have seen your brother before, Miss Hurst, a little sooner than I met you, so we are not quite strangers.'

'As I should have known, the instant I heard you speak,' said Mr. Hurst, turning towards her voice and moving slightly forward with some eagerness, but as promptly dropping back into his first attitude of leaning on the chimney-piece, arms folded over his breast; 'I told you, Jean, that foreign aid made up to me that day for our

missing each other's trains as we did. I am glad—' with a bow towards Sydney—' to be able to thank Miss Grey more fully than I could then.'

'Well, really,' cried Miss Hurst, 'this is extraordinary! for us both to have met you, both spoken to you; my brother by a double mischance, for the gentleman he had been with sent him to the station too early, so we missed travelling together, as we ought to have done, and he came the slow way round. And then for you to have found a reason for taking the situation I was talking to you about without the slightest notion of your ever wanting it; upon my word that was a most remarkable morning! I hope its events may work for the benefit of us all. Don't you, Miss Grey?'

A most remarkable morning it had truly been. Sydney, yet something bewildered

over this its curious climax, had forgotten her new personality and was thinking instead of responding. Miss Hurst felt uneasy. Whatever had induced this really beautiful young woman to come to Wynstone, she did trust the prospect of the peculiar employment required was not going to scare her away, make her a worse disappointment than that weak widow!

'I hope,' she repeated with interrogative emphasis, 'we may none of us regret the events of that singular morning, you know!'

Sydney quickly recovered herself.

'Oh no. Why should we? I,' quelling a faltering of nerve, 'I never mean to.' And re-assured by this, her hostess, employer, whatever she was to be, shook hands once more to make up perhaps for her brother's not having done so at all, and

led the new-comer upstairs, just stopping behind to utter the audible warning:

'Gilbert, stand still till I come down again. You are not so used to this room as the other. You may knock the chairs over if you move.'

'It's a fearful trial to him, is it not, Miss Grey?' she pursued, ushering Sydney to her room, 'and in a less degree to me as well. I'm sure, poor fellow, he's never off my mind a moment. And the better he bears it the more I've felt it my duty to keep constantly with him, and make him cheerful, which is not always easy. And that re-acts upon myself, and this is the real cause of my feeling we must have a third party. You understand now, I couldn't enter on all this in writing. It would have looked awkward to say in black-and-white, "I want you expressly to help in taking charge of a blind man,"

would it not? And I thought, if you'll excuse my saying so, that as you frankly said you were leaving home from circumstances you would rather not mention, why *I* might be allowed a little reservation too, you see?'

'Quite,' said Sydney smoothing her dark hair back with tired hands. Just peace from reproach, leave to earn her bread somehow, was all she felt to want awhile. 'This makes no difference to me, Miss Hurst, only show me how to be useful, I will try and be it.'

'And certainly I will show you that fast enough,' said Miss Hurst, cheerfully, 'but we need not begin to-night. To-morrow I'll explain. Now, supper will be ready in a few minutes, if you can find your way down. There's not much space to go astray in. Your room and mine look out at the back, a lovely view, as you'll say, by

daylight. Through the swing door in the passage the staircase and my brother's room. That is shut in by poplars outside, but, as I say, that doesn't matter to him. As I thought to myself when your letter reached me——'

'Yes?' said Sydney, Miss Hurst having come rather inconsequentially to a standstill. 'You thought?'

'Oh,' hesitating, 'nothing particular, Miss Grey, I shall run on till I tire you. But,' turning back at the door with a droll, bird-like air of caution, 'excuse my naming it, I hadn't mentioned anything about you to my brother. Odd, but I hadn't.'

Very odd, as Sydney could realize later, for her new friend had not the faculty of keeping much to herself!

'So he knows nothing about you, as it were: age or anything personal. And it's as well perhaps he should not. You'll feel

more comfortable, no doubt, if he imagines you, like me, about seven-and-thirty. It will put us on a pleasanter footing, won't it?'

Sydney scarcely saw the force of the argument, but, agreement being expected of her, she gave it without qualification.

'From seventeen to seventy,' she said, smiling, 'I don't mind the least what I am supposed; I won't announce that I am just twenty-one, I assure you;' and with that Miss Hurst descended, well pleased.

'A very nice, capable person I think this Miss Grey will turn out,' she informed her brother, who stood resignedly as she had left him, 'intelligent and companionable, unless I'm much mistaken. So, Gilbert, I hope I've hit on the means of giving you pleasure and myself rest. No,' stopping at a disturbed gesture of her brother, 'I didn't mean that, of course. It was a

stupid thing to say. I'm always ready to wait on you, Gilbert, my dear, and attend to you. I consider my time freely yours. Still I mean you'll naturally like a change of voice about you sometimes, and I can get out now and then, which is what I've never liked to do, for fear you should have an accident before I got back. Now this —er—person (an appellation so charmingly vague Miss Hurst kept it sacred to Sydney for many months) 'will be in charge of you, as it were, and I shall be easy. So the relief will be great. And with a little contrivance I can manage the extra expense. I do so want you to be comfortable. You are sure of that, are you not, Gilbert?'

'Yes, Jean,' he answered, the contraction of forehead, sign of distress more mental than physical, melting in a smile of singular pathos, 'I'm sure I have a sister

with the kindest heart in the world. If ever I seem to forget that, it is only because I ache under the sense of being such a burden to her.'

'Now, Gilbert, don't!' Miss Hurst stroked him affectionately with a huge wooden crotchet-hook. She was one of those women always diligently employing her fingers. 'How can you be a burden? you know I have no one—now—' with a querulous sigh, 'to care for but you. It's my duty and desire to make you happy.'

Than which nothing might be truer. And yet, poor lady, never was method clumsier than that she employed over her task. For, Sydney re-appearing just then, Miss Hurst begged her to follow to the dining-room, and seizing her brother by the arm, drove him, like a huge schoolboy in disgrace, a few paces in advance; called volubly to Fanny, the young ser-

vant in attendance, to put a certain mat straight in the lobby, unless she wished Mr. Hurst to trip over it and break his limbs; apologised to Sydney for ministering first to her brother's requirements at table, 'because,' in a stage whisper, 'it might weary him to wait, as he can't see what's going on!' And ere the end of the meal, by perpetual acts palpably well meant and exasperatingly tactless, plunged her brother into patient taciturnity, Sydney into sensitive discomfort. How she was to fill the singular position into which the evening inducted her became a prospect so formidable that the tall figure of Gilbert Hurst in every variety of unassistable dilemma haunted each hour of her first night at Wynstone, while, as if to keep her task to the fore, he himself was the first object her glance lighted on when she looked from her window next morning.

He was pacing to and fro on the asphalted path bounding the garden, which sloped from the house towards the river, his square, well-knit frame more upright than the night before, seemingly freer, more at ease alone than when under the cumbrous care of his watchful sister. To the gate of an apple orchard one way, to a thick hawthorn hedge with blossoms on the wane the other, he passed and repassed, turning at either end with a certainty that told the way was familiar. The sunshine, glinting through lilacs and acacias, fell on a face so full of resolute endurance that Sydney took shame to herself for having for a moment shrunk at the idea of serving him by any effort she could command. No, she thought, with a great generous commiseration, if it came within her scope to soften the sharp angles of his sister's 'excellencies,' to

ward off some of the blows by which affection ignorantly buffetted him, why, hers be the task right willingly. Smoothing his obvious troubles might deaden her hidden ones.

'Ah!' Her thoughts were travelling Rupertwards when she dispelled them with the frightened exclamation. Mr. Hurst had left his path, gone through the orchard gate, traversed the narrow still sloping meadow beyond, and now stood on the very brink of the hurrying river, that gleamed sparkling and shimmering over pools and shallows, between this lower and the westward bank. Surely he must be in danger. Sydney flung up her window hastily, but might have spared herself alarm. Gilbert Hurst knew every inch of Wynstone, and before her rising cry took note, had turned from the seeming peril and thrown himself on a rough

bench among the tall grass and buttercups in an attitude that he must have assumed in her dreams, so certain she felt of having seen him thus before.

Ere she could trace this fancy, or half take in the fair scene of rising tree-clad hills, basking beyond the water in pure morning light, undulating just enough to give a glimpse of blue Welsh mountain tops miles away, Miss Hurst was heard below summoning her brother to breakfast, her voice, of but few modulations, keeping up a disjointed monologue about as *à propos* as her speeches of the night previous.

'Come along, Gilbert, I want you to be quick in. It's nice, isn't it,' going to meet him, 'if you are settled in your place before a stranger comes down? Let me open the gate for you. She'll soon be used to you, and I daresay will not notice

anything much. I think you are wonderfully handy—considering! Mind this corner. Jones put some pansies here and charged me a shilling for them. You wouldn't like to walk on them, I know, so I warn you. My poor geranium, that you tumbled off the window-ledge, has not recovered yet. But, of course, you couldn't help it, so we'll forget all about it, won't we!' She had got him by the shoulder now, and was trotting awkwardly beside him in an attempt to hasten his steps and regulate her own to match. 'Don't you think, Gilbert, you might take your other tweed coat into wear for morning, now? This is fraying at the cuff, and I put an odd button or two on. Just by ourselves it didn't signify, especially when you didn't know it. But really it's only fit to give to Jones. I'll find the money for a new suit soon. You must be properly dressed be-

fore a third party. Here she comes! Good-morning, Miss Grey. My brother intends to honour you with a better coat. But I tell him it's no consequence till to-morrow. I trust you went to sleep soon. This brother of mine has a bad habit of sitting up after everyone else——' ('lamp out, of course!' in over-distinct-aside), 'and I heard him make a stumble on the stairs. I was so afraid he should unintentionally disturb you!'

'But he had not in the least,' Sydney hastened to assure them, as they reached the breakfast-room. 'She had slept quite enough, and——' by way of putting off embarassing topics, 'what a most beautiful prospect there was from her window. The woods and the river made such a perfect picture.'

But at this innocent remark, Miss Hurst, with nods, and signs, and shakes of the

head, that infinitely perplexed Sydney, made answer that, 'Oh, the place was pretty enough. New-comers thought much of it. Those who were used to it scarcely gave it a thought, though. *She* didn't! And now, would Miss Grey get a good breakfast, and then she would like to unpack, and then——' with more significant gestures, 'they could have a talk upstairs.'

Which took place about an hour later, when Sydney had disposed some of her belongings about the exquisitely neat, but most prim, little room allotted her, and then she learned not only some of her new duties but much of sundry extra delicate rules of conversation and behaviour laid down by Miss Hurst for her brother's especial behoof.

'For,' said the lady, taking a dimity-covered easy-chair herself, and motioning Sydney to be seated opposite, 'I look at

things in this light. I say, "Here is my poor brother, who has lost the power of enjoying fine views and scenes, and so forth, and, of course, every time these things are talked about, he feels the deprivation more!" So I make a point of never speaking of them, or I make-believe I don't care much about them. If he asks about the woods opposite, I answer, quite off-hand, "Oh, they're much as usual: green;" or if he talks of—well, sunrises or sunsets—be used to be great at watching things of that sort—I say I haven't any time to look at them. So I draw him off like that from enjoyments he cannot share. You perceive?'

Sydney bent her head silently. It was not a plan that commended itself particularly to her taste, but she must follow it, unless she found a better.

'It is intensely sad to think of what Mr.

Hurst has to bear,' she said, 'and it is so difficult to realise. He looks only rather short-sighted.'

'No. Which is a mercy, in its way,' Miss Hurst agreed. 'I often tell him, when he's depressed, that he has much to be thankful for. I say, "You don't look the least unpleasant, Gilbert. Some people afflicted in this way I couldn't sit down to table with. They seem to glare at one, or their eyes look like cats' eyes, just as they're going to sleep: most disagreeable. But *you*," I say, "are precisely the same good-looking man you always were." He really is nice looking, Miss Grey.'

'Very,' Sydney acquiesced.

'So I cheer him up in a sort of playful way, which you'll hardly be able to imitate at present, but, no doubt, you'll help him somehow.'

'I hope so.'

'He's clever, as you will soon find out. He paid most of his way at college with coaching other under-graduates and getting prizes. I expect, poor boy—he's five years younger than I, Miss Grey—he worked too hard from the beginning. But necessity knows no law, though I need not enter into that now. He was to have been a barrister, but it became needful for him to earn his living without loss of time, so he did just anything that brought in an income. I'm sure he never grudged his earnings to his poor father when he was living, or to me, so I willingly share everything with him now. He was tutor at some public school, and worked half the nights through at some book he meant to write. That helped the mischief with his eyes, which never were strong. Then, through a college friend's influence, the Geographical Society sent him after some-

thing in Egypt. I can't explain what, but it brought travelling through all seasons and an immense deal more writing. He never should have gone, but the pay was so good and poor papa had to resign his living then, and quite depended on Gilbert. So he kept on abroad till papa died, and then he came back with his sight ruined. A cousin of ours had just left me this little place and enough to keep it as you see. And I said to poor Gilbert, "Come to Wynstone, my dear brother, directly. Cousin Priscilla's money is not very much for two, but you shall have half and welcome." And so,' finished Miss Hurst, wiping away the moisture that suffused her mild light orbs, 'here we are. And I've told you all this, Miss Grey, so you may understand why I'm economical, and why I can't offer you much.'

'Oh, please don't mention that,' said

Sydney, unbusiness-like enough to wish she could have declined all payment. 'Thank you for telling me, and let me begin whatever I am to do.'

'Then, come downstairs, Miss Grey, and we'll hear what my brother wishes. It's a great thing that you really like reading. I don't. I like everything domestic much better, and I assure you it was no joke to be bound down to entertaining my poor brother out of one of his clever books, that I didn't understand, when cooking was going on, and, perhaps, I could hear my maids gossiping and smell my cakes burning, and my heart was in the oven, so to speak! Oh, it was trying!'

'That I can relieve you of,' said Sydney.

'And I shall certainly let you. Will you excuse my asking, but can you spell?'

'Spell? I—hope so.'

'Then that's another advantage. I can't. I mean anything out of the common. I wrote a little paper out for Gilbert once that he dictated, for a magazine, but it was rejected, and I do believe all because of my spelling. There were marks pencilled under ever so many words. And I'd spelt architecture with a *k*, and, somehow, got three *r's* in paragraph. I never dared tell Gilbert. Not that he's hasty now. I daresay he wouldn't blame me. Still, I'm glad you can spell.'

For some time, however, this educational power was not called into play.

Miss Hurst informed her brother, privately, that the useful person was prepared to act as amanuensis, but he was too reticent or too shy to give her early opportunity of doing so.

From a pile of blue-backed quarterlies

Sydney read aloud each morning in the study, parted from the dining-room by a passage running to domestic regions, while in and out at the door or by the garden window Miss Hurst would bustle a dozen times an hour, vastly enjoying immunity from literary drudgery and liberty to superintend a slow cook and a housemaid suspected of being flighty. Each afternoon another volume would be chosen. 'Shall Miss Grey begin where I left off, Gilbert?' Miss Hurst questioned, handing down a stiff work on Coptic records, with a grimace expressive of strong distaste for its contents. 'I've lost the marker, and I don't remember where we were. I think about 170 B.C. No. I suppose I mean A.D. I get so mixed.'

Mr. Hurst, however, thoroughly relishing his new reader's style, elected to begin afresh, listening with a close attention

that inspired Sydney to throw more life into her labour day by day. To her nature, delighting more in giving than receiving, it was keen pleasure to feel herself the channel of interest from the book's pages to the man's miud. That obtrusive 'ego,' which at first (small blame to her) obscured the subjects with visions of lost hopes, past struggles, past days, became, as week merged into week, less omnipresent. Theories, which drove Miss Hurst over her *tricôt* into gentle dozes, grew fascinating to the scholar trained by Robert Vaughan to something beyond schoolgirl standard. A hard knot over differing opinions set Sydney reading very slowly once, with long pauses at the full stops.

'This is dull for you, Miss Grey,' Mr. Hurst apologised, 'I ought not to have let you go on. Pray leave off.'

'I should be sorry to,' she answered, 'I only wanted to get it clear to myself. I wish I knew even the bare elements of all this better.'

'You do?' he exclaimed. 'Then you shall. There's a book——' getting up impetuously, only to seat himself again, with a sadly subdued expression. 'I forgot I cannot find it. But Jean, you will. Asleep, is she? Then when she wakes, or, if it would do as well, I might tell you what you want to know.'

'That would, indeed, be better. But it would trouble you.'

'Not the least.'

So leaning from his end of the table towards hers, *looking at* her as she always felt, so entirely his infirmity was lost sight of in the expressive mobility of the other features, he gave her the essence of much reading in few minutes, and, after that,

no matter what the subject started, Sydney had the clue to investing it with brightness. At every stage she needed explanation. This he had always ready, from books, from memory, or by-and-by, as he grew sure her interest was not feigned, from close-writ manuscripts of his own, and life began to lose, for him, its dreariness.

Mightily pleased at her discrimination in securing this well-adapted 'person,' Miss Hurst noted a change in her brother, complacently appropriating it as a personal compliment, while time and distance, though no whit diminishing Sydney's fond regard for all she had held dear at St. Clairs, yet now joined arms with her new occupation, stilled the sickening whirl she had gone through, and left her healthily tired maybe, but little disposed to brood over Mr. Villiers's defection, as over her step-sister's

chances of becoming a countess presumptive.

About which it is our duty to return to The Dale, and see what goes on.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. ALWYN GOES TO OAKLEIGH PLACE.

It was a great misfortune, or she felt it so, which amounts to the same thing, that Mrs. Alwyn's conscience, worn fine under roughish usage, still asserted its existence sufficiently to keep her extremely irritable for some time after her younger daughter's departure. Fifty times a day she assured herself she had acted with no more than necessary firmness; with common justice; that no right-minded person could blame her; that she had not the slightest call to blame herself; and yet these flattering

unctions all combined failed to set her at rest.

With the common perversity of humanity, which values what is lost or flung away, Mrs. Alwyn now acknowledged that the child of her second marriage had some rare endowments of brain and soul, and the notion that she had so worked them as to get no social *kudos* thereout, but had let them go into paltry-paid servitude, was wormwood to her. Further, by one of those uncontrollable side eddies of emotion to which mankind, the weaker sex in particular, are liable, a late-born appreciation of that slighted nature, always so grateful for any crumbs of love, dawned late upon the mother, aggravating, if not regret for her own action towards Sydney, a lively sentiment of impartial captiousness towards everyone else about her. For one-and-twenty years she had had that

youngest-born to carp at, or be kind to, as the whim took her. Now she missed her, hugged her conceit too closely to confess it, and took umbrage at all around whose questions were constantly reminding her of the girl's absence, and of the fresh entanglement she had drawn upon herself by promoting it. Suffering under this condition, described by her servants as 'bein' so nobody couldn't please her with nothin',' the *malaise* of Mrs. Alwyn pervaded every department of the household, and, as may be supposed, set ever-widening circles of gossip astir.

It was on one of June's last days, when Hills appeared at the glass door of the morning-room, asking, with a touch of his cap, if his mistress or Miss Villiers would tell him what colour Miss Sydney wished 'they stocks grafted. He'd promises of General Jacks and Madame Nomores, but

was not sure whether Miss wanted light or dark roses.'

'Either will do, either will do!' Mrs. Alwyn answered from her writing-table; 'one just as well as the other.'

But Hills was not going to be choked off in that summary fashion. Miss Sydney was the only one who interested herself in his flowers, and he determined to pay her the compliment of consulting her taste.

'I know Miss leans one way or other,' he persisted, 'and I don't want to disoblige her no ways. So shall I wait for her wiews, ma'am, till she come back?'

'Oh, wait and welcome!' With lips drawn into angry puckers, Mrs Alwyn cast back the curt answer.

'Werry well, ma'am. But as the sap's rising free, I hope Miss Sydney won't be long.'

A question, this; but Mrs. Alwyn was too much immersed in correspondence to reply. So Hills put the inquiry to Miss Villiers more pointedly.

'Come a spell of dry, Miss, we might lose the turn of the season. Could you say if Miss Sydney'll be back in a fortnight or so?'

'No,' said Leonora, from her rocking-chair, tone and manner blandly expressionless; 'I really couldn't, Hills.' And the man went off sulkily, to take counsel of Phillips on the pantry steps.

'I've bin askin' 'em in there,' with a jerk towards the ladies' room, 'when they look for Miss Sydney, and neither on 'em 'll tell me. They hevn't took an' quarrelled with her, hev they?'

'Goodness know's what they're up to,' returned Phillips. 'Missus is as close as a nut, and, of course, Miss Leonora don't

say a word to such as we. But my advice is, Hills, bud your roses as fast as you please. A young lady that takes all her winter clothes away with her in June ain't coming back in no fortnight. Mark me!'

'Then ain't she a-comin' at all?' cried honest Dan Hills, discomfited.

'You leave me to find out, and when I know I'll tell you.'

So Phillips took her turn at investigating matters, and inquired most respectfully next day of her mistress when Miss Sydney's room was to be set in order for her. She didn't wish to be behind with it, and it would take her a whole forenoon.

'Do it when I tell you,' said Mrs. Alwyn, shortly, with an angry gleam at the back of her eye. And Phillips answered,

'Oh, *very* well, 'm,' with such extraordinary meekness that her mistress scented suspicion in the obedient syllable. Her servants were conniving at unearthing her secrets. She would give them something else to do!

'On the whole, though,' she said, with a good assumption of second consideration, 'I think the room had better be thoroughly turned out. Help Walters with it to-morrow and the next day. Then it will be ready for Miss Sydney, if she returns next week.'

'And for anyone else if she doosn't!' commented Phillips, acutely, on this order. And she added, borrowing the phraseology of a gamekeeping parent, that no one was quicker at a double than her mistress, but she, Phillips, was not to be took in by no doubles, and it

was her belief that Miss Sydney was gone for good.

This disquieting opinion soon spread in St. Clairs. Reaching Patty Peggs, of whom, as of all her pupils and pensioners, Sydney had dared take no leave, it reduced her to a state of abject sorrow, and furnished her with courage to go bobbing, like a cork afloat, to Mrs. Alwyn the next Sunday, with 'Please, mum, ain't Miss Sydney a-comin' to learn us our singin' no more? Mother an' me du want to know bad.' And old Mrs. Hills lay in wait at the door, like an anxious spider, to catch the lady from The Dale with the same question; and even Mrs. Dacie, disturbed by some echo of this remarkable report, donned her black silk and the jet-trimmed mantle of five summers, and went over to Sydney's old home, with the

valiant determination to come at the truth one way or other.

But the doctor's good wife was easily disposed of.

'To an old friend like yourself, Mrs. Dacie,' said Mrs. Alwyn, meeting inquiry with a melancholy that was quite overawing, 'I don't mind confessing that Sydney has disappointed me—oh, sadly, me and others, me grievously. She is best away till—till it has blown over. Excuse my saying more. It is too painful. And are you really stronger, Mrs. Dacie? And how is the kind doctor?' Et cetera, et cetera.

Mary's simple-minded mother went away, after a most affable half-hour, convinced that her favourite's banishment was only the outcome of a difference on matrimonial plans, and volunteered the opinion cheerfully that, 'though she couldn't tell Mrs. Alwyn as much, her own notion

always had been that Sydney was far too good for die-away Mr. Villiers. Mr. Drayton, now, was far more worthy her. How nice it would be if he came over again, and they two made a match of it, wouldn't it?'

This call, however, left Mrs. Alwyn deeply disturbed. One mysterious sentence had been uttered, 'Neither of your young ladies to be getting married, after all we'd expected. Dear, dear!' And these ominous words strengthened a gruesome dread which had stolen lately into her mind. Leonora coming in as the visitor from the Gate House left found her mother perturbed past reasonable explanation.

'This state of things distracts me!' the elder lady cried. 'I can't keep up the farce of that unfortunate child Sydney being out on a visit for ever. And I *will* not be compelled to publish the truth. I keep

staving matters off till something—happens. Something gets settled. For you, I mean. My poor Leonora.'

'Ah,' said Leonora, with plaintive dissatisfaction, 'but nothing does happen or get settled, mamma.'

'But it may, my dear. Oh, it must!'

'It's exactly three weeks and three days since Mr. Duvesne last called, mamma.'

Mrs. Alwyn stayed her agitated carpet promenade, sank on a chair, and for a couple of minutes sat as if focussed for a model of middle-aged perplexity. Her nerves were so unstrung, her judgment in such confusion, her patience so exhausted, her calm so ruffled, that a decisive step of some sort she must take, whether right or wrong.

As it happened she took the wrong.

'Ring the bell, Leonora,' she exclaimed, getting up, flushed with rising determina-

tion, 'and order the pony-carriage. Tell Phillips she must come and help me to dress. For'—kissing her daughter—'I am going to Oakleigh Place.'

Some thirty minutes the lady spent upstairs, devoting ability and discrimination to a more than ordinarily careful toilette. Then she descended, her still handsome countenance gone into visiting array of suave composure; her costume of plain, rich, steel satin, softest ostrich tips of the same hue about her head-gear; her slightly superabundant figure toned down by a costly Spanish mantilla, that fell about her in the peculiarly-graceful folds attained by no other fabric in the world. With perfect gloves, a card-case of oxydised silver, her gold eyeglass unobtrusively peeping forth from her bodice, no ornament save a heavy necklace of superb onyx beads, Mrs. Alwyn might have passed for

the peeress going to patronise the plebeian. Her mirror said as much, and furnished her with self-possession for the expedition. One glance she cast at Hills—the corduroyed gardener completely lost in the bright-buttoned, well-liveried groom—at the well-hung little carriage that betrayed none of the slovenliness of country equipages—at the glossy, well-kept pony, and the neatly-monogrammed harness. These passing muster irreproachably, she took her seat, shook out her silken summer rug, unfurled her sunshade, with hope beating high, gave the order, 'To Oakleigh Place,' and off to Oakleigh Place they started.

Now, at that very hour, Lady Comyngham was studying a letter received the same morning from Lady Avena Massey. It was not the countess's regulation afternoon 'At home,' so, in the comfortable

abandon of a very well-worn morning costume, her ladyship, after a forenoon's audit with her housekeeper, was just reposing on her own small drawing-room sofa, her writing-table beside her, her daughters Margaret and Gertrude posed attentively as she read aloud scraps of their sister's missive.

'"Christening day so fine. Baby behaved like a little angel. The little girls" ('Bless them!') "so proud of their new brother!" Ah, that I read at breakfast. But I skipped a piece somewhere because of your papa. You know he's disposed to limit our visiting circle in a way I tell him can't be done in the country. But he nearly rebelled at our omnium gatherum last summer, and would joke me for ever if he found I had taken people up whom now I wanted to drop. So I stopped short at this bit about Mrs. Alwyn. Here it is.

Listen, my dears. "One singular thing happened on the busy christening day. When I went up from dinner, of course I had to go for a peep at my boy. As a great treat I gave my maid Lewis leave to go to the nursery and assist in putting him into his bassinette. Imagine my vexation when I saw his beautiful robe, which your neighbour, Mrs. Alwyn, sent him, hanging scorching in front of the fire in the night nursery! The lace was absolutely ruined. It was Lewis's fault, it appears, and when I reproved her for her dreadful carelessness, she broke forth crying violently, and sobbed out that the lace was horrible unlucky stuff all through, and she wished such ill-gotten gains might not bring the dear baby ill-luck! Of course I insisted on this being explained, and then she told me that her father had lost *all* his savings through this Mrs. Alwyn's husband, and

that, when she had been at St. Clairs with me and seen the style of living at The Dale, she wrote in her ill mother's name, begging a trifle for the old couple, and got an angry letter back and the noble sum of two-and-sixpence!" '

'The cold-blooded creature!' cried Lady Margaret. 'Mamma, I never liked that woman! But is Avena sure it's true?'

'Well, hark. "I quieted Lewis, and when I went down I made an opportunity of asking old Lady Wynne about these Alwyns. It seems that years ago they lived near each other in Worcestershire, and Mrs. Alwyn, according to Lady Wynne, was a handsome, fashionable, pushing sort of person, who forced her way into society, where she was not so welcome as her husband would have been if he had cared to enter it. He was a lawyer, and his clients all respected him

immensely. He was rich too, but after he married his wife gave him no opportunity of saving. And when he failed through some mining catastrophe, Mrs. Alwyn gathered all the personal and household valuables together that she could, and decamped with them and refused to spare one penny of her handsome settlements, to save her husband's unlucky creditors from any misery whatever !" '

'Horrible woman !' chorussed the countess's daughters.

'" The Wynnes and everyone in Stillcote considered her conduct most grasping and cruel, and I can assure you, dearest mamma, the notion of being under an obligation to such a person is most painful to me. I felt relieved that the robe was destroyed. I shall let Lewis sell that piece of Mechlin she gave me and pass the price on to her poor father. I need

not say to you, pray don't let the girls get intimate at The Dale! And in future, Edward——" Oh, that's all, I see.'

'And quite enough too, mamma!'

'Yes, it's annoying, is it not? But it's quite impossible to enter a new neighbourhood without making a blunder or two. We must get over this as civilly as possible, but let Mrs. Alwyn distinctly see we intend no visiting in future. I'm glad she was occupied when Edward last went. With his thoughtless good-temper he might have been led into making all sorts of engagements. Which owes a call, my dears, Mrs. Alwyn or myself?'

'You do, mamma. She came a day or two after lunching here.'

'Obtrusive, very. However, we go to Scotland in August. Till then we'll take care to see nothing of her——'

The door opened, and a footman appeared. 'Mrs. Alwyn, my lady.'

'Not at——' began the countess. But too late. The soft sweep of the visitor's skirt was on the steps. Mesdames Gertrude and Margaret, exchanging smiles, vanished into an adjacent conservatory. Mrs. Alwyn sailed gracefully into the room, and Lady Comyngham, looking anything but pleased, lurched inelegantly from her sofa to receive this undesired guest.

With silent satisfaction Mrs. Alwyn perceived her hostess at a disadvantage. Gauging other people's feeling by her own, she attributed to her *déshabille* the marked expression of annoyance that swept over the countess's features, and in her most propitiatory tones proceeded to offer apologies, which she half-considered her own due. To be found not *bien*

arrangée after luncheon, struck Mrs. Alwyn almost as a sin!

'How exceedingly kind of you, dear Lady Comyngham, to admit me on one of your off days. I felt sure you would.' ('Why?' the countess's suddenly stiffened figure seemed to ask.) 'Or I should rather say, I hoped you would. I so much wished, wanted to see you.'

Here a slight pause. Then Lady Comyngham, smoothing her crumpled frills, replied, unsmilingly, that 'Mrs. Alwyn was very—kind.'

'I had been thinking of leaving St. Clairs for a few weeks. The Dale is in such a hollow. We feel it relaxing. My daughter really requires a more bracing air, but——

'Ah,' interrupted the countess, with real interest, 'one daughter *is* gone out, I hear.' (Mrs. Alwyn flinched. What was coming?)

'But not, I think, as you expected when you last spoke of her. Not as a bride?'

'No—oh, dear no. She is merely away'—(boldly) 'on a long visit.'

'Not a ruptured engagement, then, I hope,' returned the countess, civilly. ('For,' as she said to her daughter afterwards, 'that younger girl was unmistakably a gentlewoman. I am not ashamed to admit I always liked *her*.') 'I should be sorry to hear of any disappointment to Miss Alwyn. She seemed so radiant when we last met.'

'And might have remained so, had she taken my advice,' replied Mrs. Alwyn, vastly relieved to find no idea of the truth concerning Sydney existed at Oakleigh; 'but,' going on more confidently, 'my younger child is not like my elder, and she must abide by her own independence. Some day, dear Lady Comyngham—but I

couldn't bring myself to it now—I do so wish to tell you part at least of my last month's vexations.' (The countess just bowed, without any appearance of being charmed at the prospect). 'To-day it is pleasanter to dwell only on my Leonora's trust in her mother. She, dear girl, leaves all things, her closest hopes, even, in her mother's hands.'

'Very becoming of Miss Villiers,' said the countess, drily.

'And to be very, very frank, it is this confidence my child puts in me which brings me here now.'

'Indeed!'

The ejaculation was cold. Mrs. Alwyn felt the ground terribly delicate; the sympathetic atmosphere not exhilarating. She endeavoured to impart some warmth into the situation by a touch of sentiment, and with her diaphanous square of lawn at

her eyes, murmured, 'Mothers will do anything for their children, dear Lady Comyngham.'

'Oh, of course, they will,' answered her ladyship, wondering why in the name of fortune such a truism was launched at her just now.

'And—I was most unfortunately prevented seeing Mr. Duvesne on the two last occasions when he called at The Dale.' (Her hearer's eyes suddenly shot forth apprehension. Then contracted with a dangerous sparkle.) 'So when I saw my dear girl anxious, *distraite*, not herself, reluctant to leave St. Clairs, though her health is suffering, I took my resolve for her sake. I said to myself, "Don't let false delicacy stop you! Elders may set everything right easily." So I came straight to you.'

'Oh! really!' said Lady Comyngham,

upright and about as yielding as a post. 'And pray, Mrs. Alwyn, what is it you wish us elders to set right?'

Unpromising this, but Mrs. Alwyn rallied her forces round Mr. Duvesne's many remembered attentions, and pushed undaunted on.

'Your son has been our very frequent guest, Lady Comyngham, as, no doubt, you are aware.'

'Your guest, I believe, Mrs. Alwyn, some five or six times during the past year. I have begged him often not to intrude. He has told me you were so hospitable, he found it difficult to decline your frequent invitations.'

'We were most delighted to see him, dear Lady Comyngham.' ('Why so often "dear?"' thought the countess, getting restless.) 'Only too delighted. Had you been with him you would—you must, I

believe, have put the same construction on his visits we did.'

'The construction I should have put,' said the countess, in a very business-like manner, for she saw now what impended, and resolved to nip it in the bud, if practicable, 'would have been that you made much of my son, and, consequently, he relished your entertainment. Edward always liked ladies' society. It's a privilege of young clergy to enjoy that sort of thing. But I am very sorry he imposed himself on you so much.'

'Sorry! Oh, we need not be that, if all ends well!' said Mrs. Alwyn, her handkerchief at play again. 'I assure you we felt him, we treated him as one of ourselves.' (The countess had some ado to repress an indignant interjection.) 'He consulted us continually, pointedly, on all connected with his new house. He took my dearest

Leonora's opinion on every shade, on every arrangement. What could I think of that but that he desired to—to——'

'Get his rectory as pretty as possible for his wife?' (The countess had made up her mind the sooner further confession stopped the better.) 'And you were quite right, Mrs. Alwyn. That is my son's aim. He gave you, I fancy, since you showed such politeness to him, a good many hints on the subject. More than were quite wise. For only within the last month has he been at liberty to speak out——

'That,' interposed Mrs. Alwyn, 'is why I came.'

'—And say that for years he has been engaged to a daughter of General Lermit.' (Poor Mrs. Alwyn's onyx beads absolutely jingled with her start.) 'They are just returning from India, and my son is at

Southampton, waiting to meet Miss Lermit, whom he is to marry next month. The general is peculiar, and begged no engagement should be made public till close on their return. Of course, we had to respect his wishes. Dear me, how warm the room is,' walking off without a glance at her listener, to fling a window open. 'There, that makes it better.'

Mrs. Alwyn wanted air. A chagrin, intensely real, displaced her well-acted smiles and sentimentalism. Mortification nigh choked her. As for that ill-dressed earl's wife so loftily ignoring her semi-confession—fool that she had been to make it!—if Fate ever gave her the chance of repaying that slight, should not the debt be wiped out with compound interest! There was pitched battle within her bosom to fetch a syllable of decent courtesy to her twitching lips. But after brief silence

she contrived to say, with emphasis as little bitter as might be, for acquaintance with the nobility must not be lightly resigned, 'I regret that Mr. Edward Duvesne gave us no chance of—congratulating him earlier. Of course, we do so now.'

'Much obliged,' said the countess, frostily.

'And beyond this I say no more. It is useless to dwell on the—unfortunate—concealment he adopted.'

'Kindly remember,' said the countess, nettled, 'his reticence was not his own choice. We Comynghams are not secretive, whatever our faults. *This* concealment was purely unavoidable.'

Mrs. Alwyn felt as though, if denied retort, she must die of spleen. Rashly she answered,

'Unavoidable! Possibly. Some people

might—outsiders only, of course—I don't say I do, consider it dishonourable.'

It is dangerous to attack a woman's son. Lady Comyngham swiftly brought an unexpected weapon to the front. Drawing her inches to their fullest height, and looking from top to toe the countess, spite of her tumbled muslin gown,

'Mrs. Alwyn,' she said, 'according to what I hear, through my friend Lady Wynne, in Worcestershire, you can scarcely claim to be an acceptable critic on what is or what is not honourable. Allow me' —her fingers on the bell—'to wish you good-day.'

Cowed out of ready speech for once, John Alwyn's clever widow was in another minute gone from Oakleigh Place, never to return.

'Give me a fan!' cried Lady Comyngham, to her re-appearing daughters.

'Open all the windows. That woman has poisoned the place with Frangipanni. I hate Frangipanni. I'm afraid I hate her. By her own showing, girls, she barefacedly lured Edward to her house, and had the atrocious effrontery to imagine she had secured him for her daughter Leonora! I told Edward he was foolish to praise that Miss Villiers's complexion, even before me. He said it was like Mary's, so he couldn't help the compliment. This is what comes of it. Upon my word your father is right. We must draw the line closer, my dears. At any rate, from this day forth, that woman from The Dale goes off our list.'

The countess need not have troubled to make this amendment. The 'woman from The Dale' speedily betook herself beyond the range of the most noble Comyngham circle.

From her disastrous drive Mrs. Alwyn went home so exasperated with this fresh stroke of ungracious fortune that, had she been a South-Sea Islander badgering her blessings out of a wooden idol, the probability is, in her last access of downright rage, she would have had that idol off its pedestal, and thrashed it soundly for its baneful contrariness. Her theological upbringings, however, denying her that consolation, she took the best circumstances permitted. Leonora, her vanity, luckily nothing deeper, smarting most poignantly, was only too ready to quit the scene of her unsuccessful youth. Preparations for lengthened absence were hastily made. A stack of cards, *pour prendre congé*, went forth by post, and almost as soon as these reached their destination, the senders were gone from the dwelling they had graced so many years.

Later, Mr. Russell and railway-vans put in an appearance. The Dale was dismantled. From the earl's agent it leaked out the property was in process of purchase for the Comynghams, negotiations being carried on through the late owner's brother. Having long before risen on the village, from no one knew where, they disappeared none could tell whither, but henceforth St. Clairs knew nothing more of handsome Mrs. Alwyn and her handsome daughter, Miss Villiers.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. HURST MAKES AN AWKWARD DISCOVERY.

At the end of one month Miss Hurst conceived it her duty to inquire, with much polite circumlocution, whether Miss Grey found her residence at Wynstone sufficiently satisfactory to hold out hope of its being prolonged.

'Plainly,' said Sydney, smiling, though she felt none so jubilant, 'do I like my place? Yes, Miss Hurst. I have no wish to leave it, if I suit it and suit—my mistress.'

She faltered over that bit of bravado.

Now and then came a day when it was difficult to keep an even spirit, a happy bearing. Such a wrench of old ties as Sydney, valiant in her recognised duty, had achieved, is not allowed by Madame Nature to sink into the great past to the beat of an ever-placid pulse, or under the benison of constant self-approval. There were times when the girl, bred and born to the adjuncts of at least moderate wealth, felt hampered and prisoned in the small house at Capel Moor, with its prim spinster furnishing and garniture, when the sense of having no other claimable shelter appalled her. A panic of this sort was on her to-day, which had brought her tidings that her mother and Leonora were leaving England for months, and her isolation seemed complete: when in her hand she held the few coins that represented thirty days' hire, and felt for the instant staggered at the

unromantic fact that she was in humbly-paid service.

But she was sorry for her rash utterance when she saw Miss Hurst took it as a species of complaint.

'Mistress!' the lady repeated, reproachfully. 'Now, Miss Grey, is it quite fair to use a word that seems to insinuate I have given myself airs? When I've been so careful to speak of you as a friend who opportunely found it convenient to share our home; and I am sure I have always felt towards you and treated you as such. I wouldn't even let Mrs. Preece, when she came to see me the other day, call you my companion, for I said no, "lady's companion" always reminds me of those nasty little work-cases, with scissors too small to get your thumb in, and thimble a mile too large, and nothing that fits anything, and that's the very reverse of Miss Grey. But

if, after all, it's as a mistress you regard me, why, I should be sorry to detain you in a situation which, as I have my wits about me, of course I can see is in many ways far beneath you.'

Sydney grew ashamed and repentant as this speech proceeded.

'Dear Miss Hurst,' she said, contritely, when the lady ended with a little toss of affront, 'please forgive me. I sounded ungrateful, but I did not mean to be so. It's only that I can't forget everything all at once. But I am thankful to be here, and I am not likely to want to go till you send me away.'

'Which won't be in a hurry then,' said Miss Hurst, as easily mollified as moved, 'and as for being down sometimes, why, I suspect everyone is that. I know I am. I've things to grieve over, oh dear! they won't bear looking back on. Perhaps you

have the same. Very likely, as you are younger, things seem harder, though, indeed, Miss Grey, neither the teens nor the twenties have a monopoly of very tender sorrows. A—h!'

A deep sigh courted invitation to confidential disclosures, but Sydney, conscious that her own story must remain sealed, kept silence, with a blush so deep that Miss Hurst drew therefrom her own conclusions, and with self-denial, most laudable considering she was bubbling over with curiosity, carried the conversation to other channels.

'If it is any pleasure to you to hear it, I will say I consider our arrangement quite a piece of luck. If you had seen my brother before you came, which is impossible, but you know what I mean, you would understand how different he is now. And in pastry, too, the change is astonish-

ing. Time after time Rebecca used to send up crust that really might have been tossed over the roof with less injury to itself than the tiles. Now, you can testify, Miss Grey, our dinners are not disgraced by such cookery. And why? Ah, h—a! Rebecca knows better than to let her fire out of a morning when I'm near! And Gilbert's spirits are so improved too. Why, I heard him laughing yesterday. What was it at, Miss Grey?'

'Only a line from Horace in the paper I was reading.'

'And you could pronounce it properly!'

'I tried.'

'I envy you. What a muddle I used to make of those foreign bits. First I hopped them, hoping he wouldn't miss them, but he always did. Then I spelt them out, but that didn't answer. Then in my own way I used to labour to amuse him

I used to get bits from *Punch*, and any comic anecdote, and I used to say, "Here's something so droll for you to hear, Gilbert;" and I would tell him the funniest jokes, ever so many at a time, and yet he hardly ever laughed. But I said to him last night, "Gilbert, Miss Grey is getting quite valuable. Worth much more than the small salary I can afford her. But rather than lose her now I would stint myself anyhow, or do work for a poor gentlewoman's fancy repository. So if ever you require a little rise, Miss Grey, tell me, and I'll manage it.'

But Miss Grey had no intention of asking a rise. The light addition she now carried off to her store swelled the grand total to thirty-six pounds, ten; and that she calculated would afford Christmas-boxes for a long while to St. Clairs. The money outlay of her present life was next

to nil. The fateful loan, advanced by her mother, was repaid, for Jacob had sent her, in six notes, the residue of her six thousand. Now she, who had always longed to be in some ways lavish, must only be so in coin less mutable than gold, must spend youth and energy in brightening this out-of-the-way home the waves of her self-will had cast her into, and for lack of nearer, dearer interests, must beat the bounds of this new, narrow dominion, till, perhaps, she grew into an old maid like Miss Jean Hurst. The brilliant summertime she had sketched out had come to this. Well, with burning cheeks, she thought, rather than have been wed and then waked up to find herself and her existence bartered for metal that rang false, her present lot was one she would have chosen open-eyed, a lot by no means despicable, from its lowliest function

of improving piecrust to its worthier of lifting some gloom off Gilbert Hurst's career.

In this last direction her powers waxed stronger week by week. As summer waned, day only seemed to break on Gilbert Hurst with the first sound of Sydney's voice. Her presence seemed to transform his life. Did he ask himself 'how?' Well, by countless womanly intuitions: by the contact of a most animated intelligence. If by aught else, the time to formulate other influence had not quite come. It was yet hidden, unsuspected, but—growing.

Early September took Sydney for her first *exeat* from Wynstone. When the dispersing of her money was accomplished, Jacob Cheene urged that they might meet and the receipts for her father's debts be delivered to her. The asked-for hours

were given instantly, though Miss Hurst was a trifle disappointed that the object and destination of her journey were not explained.

Quite early, when the sun was showing a copper-coloured disc behind an autumn haze, Sydney set out to the little mile-off railway station. Footsteps had already brushed the dew-spangled cobwebs from the path by the poplars. The white gate stood open. Outside, sentry-like, was Mr. Hurst. He heard the first fall of her foot, and, his face lighting up with that full expressiveness that made his deprivation seem incredible, asked, might he make his morning walk beside her.

'Gladly,' she answered, 'if,' instinctively choosing just the words that would not wound, 'if he knew that road as marvellously as he did others about Wynstone.'

'Thank you,' he said, very contentedly measuring his steps by hers, 'but my memory is only canine. I was our cousin Priscilla Hammond's godson, and in my young time came holiday-making to Capel Moor, till I learnt every nook about the place. I was to have been my godmother's heir, but she changed her mind on that point.'

'Oh, but that was a pity. What made her do so?' Sydney exclaimed, with more impulse than discretion.

'A common-sense view of the situation. For in those days, Miss Grey, I had a notion that I could carve out what fortune I liked. Our worthy old cousin took me at my own estimate, and left her little property to the one she thought would want it most.'

Natural enough, this, yet Sydney could not help feeling that, as events had

disposed themselves, it was something like leaving a managing magpie in charge of a disabled eagle! Then she chid herself for this ungracious metaphor, and made amends for the mental injustice.

'Perhaps it does not signify, Mr. Hurst, which had the money. It would be shared anyhow. Your sister delights, above all things, in using it for you.'

'Poor Jean!' he answered, with a shake of the head, and a smile that had sadness in it. 'Her small estate is eaten up by one pensioner. When I was young I was hot-headed and arrogant, I fancy. I've fallen on lines that take that sort of nonsense out of a man, Miss Grey. Poor Jean!'

That reiteration was the nearest, the only approach to complaint Mr. Hurst ever made over his own and his sister's relative positions. But Sydney, looking

up shyly, for she never lost the sense that he was meeting her gaze, saw how deep were the lines of endurance about the firm mouth. How the grave serenity of the whole face betokened mastery of the strong passion and will rather than the placidity of inborn composure, and the pity that welled up within her was less for 'poor Jean' than for Jean's brother.

'Mind,' he said, as they reached the shallow valley through which the coming train was sounding like distant wind, 'there are the roots of an elm-tree across the footpath a little way on. Don't forget them if it is dusk when you return home.'

'Thank you; but it will not be dusk. I shall be home at six.'

'Good news, that. We shall be wanting you. Good-bye till then.'

He lifted his hat. His words were grateful to her. At The Dale her adieux were

differently phrased. She could have shaken hands for friendly, short farewell, but one of Miss Hurst's super-refined rules restrained her. 'I tell my brother it makes him look ridiculous to stand, perhaps with his hand extended, and the person who is going, possibly, never noticing it. So I advise him only to bow. I try to spare his feelings in all these little ways, you know.' So, with 'Good-bye,' Sydney let him turn back, standing some seconds to watch with what perfect ease and certainty his tall form took the well-known homeward way. Wynstone regained (that walk seemed longer than the outward one), Mr. Hurst heard footsteps pattering near the door.

'Who is it?' he asked, stooping, for the steps were of a pigmy, and a juvenile treble responded,

'Please, sir, me.'

'And what may "me" be wanting?'

He was always gentle with children. Not one in Capel Moor feared the blind gentleman.

'Oh, if you please, sir, it's some foxes gloves mother have sent the lady.'

'What lady? Miss Hurst?'

'No, sir, the young lady, if you please, as come by yesterday and give mother sixpence 'cause she 've sprained her wris'.'

'And you don't know her name?'

'No, sir. But if you please, she live here and she's the pretty lady.'

He took the flowers carefully indoors, and summoned Rebecca to put them in Miss Grey's room.

Miss Hurst, coming downstairs, met the flowers *en route*, and learned part of their story from her brother. The little messenger's adjectives, however, escaped repeating.

'It would be Ruth Davis, I expect. Miss

Grey likes the road past their cottage, and she's a person that, I've no doubt, poor people would take to.'

An opinion on which penniless Mr. Hurst entertained no doubt whatever.

At Stillcote-Upton Sydney spent a day, wherein sweets and bitters were strangely mingled. Arrived at Mr. Cheene's dwelling, Nancy, in stiff lilac print, her carrotty locks skewered away under a white muslin helmet, ushered her through what had been Miss Ambler's shop, but was now promoted to the dignity of a private sitting-room, up stairs slippery and splendid with twenty-four inch American cloth, to the lodger's apartment, which, rehabilitated by drugget and clean curtains, polished windows, and some pounds of fresh paint, looked quite an elegant apartment, full five shillings a week more lettable than three months before.

Suggestions of replenished purses filled the air. Jacob, in his Sunday suit, was waiting for her. The odour of excellent coffee, prepared by Miss Ambler's hands for Mr. Cheene's visitor, blended with the scent of mignonette in a gorgeous market nosegay, and a scheme to make this day as festively as possible unlike her last one there, was effectively carried out, with only a few minutes' unpreventable collapses.

'I have worked you too hard, Jacob,' Sydney said, anxiously, when Nancy, having stumped off with the breakfast, she fetched her father's office stool forth, and seated herself at the old clerk's feet; 'you are thinner and paler. You are tired out with all our talking.'

'Tired out with pleasure, then, Miss Sydney; and they say that never kills.'

'It had not need. Our one friend. My father's and mine.'

'No fear. If it could it would have done it these last few weeks.'

'Were the people glad, then?'

'"Glad" isn't word enough, Miss Sydney. They were nearly dazed with delight, some of them.'

Then he told her, taking his time over it, for, as he said, he got neither younger nor stronger nowadays, how the few score pounds here, the few hundreds there, had come like a gift on those who so long had thought their savings lost. How some could not believe their luck till hard cash proved their glad surprise no dream. How they had made him ambassador of thanks unnumbered to the nameless individual who had set them thus rejoicing. How one and all—Sydney exulted over this—had said, 'wasn't it the very thing poor Mr. Alwyn would have done if money had come to him before he died, for they

knew he wasn't the man to injure a soul willingly.' And he showed her letters of blundering orthography, but unmistakeable gratitude, and graphically described his poor, hard-pressed landlady's outburst of joy. How she had positively refused her share till assured none came out of his, Jacob's, pocket ('as if I could have saved it!') and how, when convinced her fortune had come back in a golden lump, she had insisted on embracing Mr. Cheene, and laughed, and cried, and poured out such a jumble of blessings on her anonymous benefactor, mixed with such self-obloquy at having overstepped the bounds of justice in the matter of her lodger's 'leavings,' as, confessed Jacob, surreptitiously smoothing his shaggy eyebrows, 'made a thorough old simpleton of me, Miss Sydney, though I hadn't felt so happy for this fifteen years.'

And he told, too, of the bewildered joy, and later substantial comfort, of poor John Lewis. How the cottage he had been so proud of would be free again at Michaelmas, and he was to get back to it with his old wife, who had never once lifted voice against her former master, and how, with Nurse's money and their own, poverty would never hang about their door again.

Sydney's eyes overflowed at that:—

'If only dear old Taffy could have had her share! You put what I told you for her, Jacob!'

'Yes,' he answered, 'it's there safely. Her place among the graves won't be forgotten now. But I felt as if I hardly ought to let you do it, Miss Sydney. You've left yourself the poorest of all.'

'Poor!' She looked up, a light in her beautiful eyes prosperity could never have kindled:—

'Jacob, I never felt so rich! But remember, I still am in debt. There is interest on interest. I wonder if ever I shall be able to pay it.'

'And I wonder,' said Mr. Cheene, 'if ever you will begin to get anything for yourself. Money seems to burn a hole in your pocket, Miss Sydney.'

She laughed, though tears twinkled on her long lashes.

'It's very little money gets the chance of burning holes now. And, if I were as rich as Crœsus, there are things, people, I couldn't pay. You, for example.'

'That's nothing, Miss Sydney. Only a poor attempt to pay off what I owed your father.'

'Ah, you say that to ease me!'

'No,' turning from her intent watching, 'I say it to take what you might feel a burden off your shoulders. For the sake

of that I'll tell you the truth, as no one else on earth knows it. Yes, take hold of me; that helps me, just as your father did when he'd come up and down High Street with his arm through mine. Miss Sydney, when I was not much more than a lad, and your father was just head of the office, I got into ill company. I'd joined a glee club, as they called it; but our evenings that began with glees ended with loo. And I lost at that, and—and——'

'Oh, Jacob dear, don't tell me this. It doesn't matter now!'

'And the only way I could pay was by borrowing from my master. There, that's not the word. Miss Sydney, I—stole. No one found me out but your father. He bowed me to the very ground; not with anger, with forgiveness. He made a man out of what might have been a miser-

able felon. I was wretched and a coward, and I should never have dared face the world if it had not been for his brave help. But he turned my first snare into a safeguard. He made me work at true music under his very own teaching. And he never despised me, though he knew my sin. After that, Miss Sydney, don't you ever cumber your mind with the thought of owing me anything. The greatest trouble I have is the knowledge that I've not a farthing to leave John Alwyn's child.'

'Who will never want it, dear old Jacob,' pressing his arm to her. 'You give her a better heritage in her father's praise!'

It was after a triumphant dinner, cooked by Miss Ambler, recklessly regardless of a sixpence or two extra in the way of sauce or vegetable, served by Nancy in a

stuff gown and white cuffs, that Jacob Cheene and his guest strolled through the streets of Stillcote, and he showed her the way out to Guyswick; his old lodgings, which he had quitted to share small means and short commons with Miss Ambler; 'Stuarts,' owned now by a wine merchant, and the big church of St. Clements, where——

But there he broke off to ask of those with whom she lived, their age, their bearing to herself.

As far as she knew it, she gave him the Hursts' history, and admitted that they were kind enough to make her sometimes wish she could drop the incognita her mother had imposed upon her. But, for a marvel, Jacob agreed with Mrs. Alwyn.

'If you are fairly happy, Miss Sydney, let well alone. If ever you wanted to

leave them, you are not so far off now; you would come to me.'

That Sydney promised, seeing that it pleased him to count himself her guardian; and, anyhow, another June she was to ask a whole week's holiday, and they were to pass it together. With which prospect the station was once more reached, and farewells said between these May and December friends, whom the day had drawn together by kindlier ties than ever.

Capel Moor was reached as the last gleams of sunlight kissed the crests of the golden woods. Sydney hastened towards Wynstone through the upward lane, whose long-ago quarried sides were dressed now with elm bush and brambles, fringed with bracken and tall hart's-tongue ferns. At the angle where lane joined road, and the weather-beaten, lancet-windowed church

stood on the hill summit, a figure waited, leaning on the low lichen-tinted wall.

'I knew you would come,' said Mr. Hurst, as she drew near. 'My sister prophesied you would enjoy your freedom till the last train. I was sure you would not disappoint us.'

Sydney's sympathies had been too much on the alert the whole day through not to catch quickly now at the implied need. It brought back old times, when her father counted every moment of her absence. There was sweetness in being again wanted, yet, out of a full heart, she had no words to acknowledge it. Mr. Hurst marked her silence.

'Will you come through the churchyard? It is the nearest way home. You are tired?'

'Not very.'

Something in the still scene, the quiet

tombs, the silent house of many generations' prayers, unsteadied her voice. Mr. Hurst turned to her suddenly:—

'Sorry to leave those whom you went to see? Sorry to be in this dull spot again?'

'No, no; indeed, no.'

'For that, thank you,' he said. 'You are getting me into such ill habits, Miss Grey: it seems like losing my sight over again not to have you at Wynstone.'

From this strong, vigorous man, the confession of dependence took Sydney's pity so unawares she utterly forgot Miss Hurst's deep device for sparing his feelings. He was holding the gate open for her. Into his right hand she put her own, warm, soft, ungloved, and said very gently, as if soothing some one sorely maimed,

'I was selfish to go. But, now, I shall

not want to be away for months and months. The more you can teach me to do for you the better.'

Miss Hurst wondered volubly the evening through why her brother preferred wandering outside in the moonlight, 'which, though it's lovely, as I say, he can't enjoy,' to coming in and enjoying her society and Sydney's. She had fancied he would be pleased when Miss Grey got back. But gentlemen were very odd. She supposed he preferred the company of his own thoughts.

They were thoughts Gilbert Hurst longed, with all the throes of despair, to be rid of. Thoughts of a tender throbbing touch that still seemed lying in his own broad grasp. A touch waking a joy and an anguish that must needs run side by side till death extinguished them.

CHAPTER X.

THE FRIENDS SHE LEFT BEHIND HER.

Mr. Drayton never came to St. Clairs that summer to be received kindly for his own or anybody else's sake, and all that happened in the village between hay-cutting and harvest only added to the perplexity which began and the depression which increased with Sydney's departure.

Too loyal to the absent girl to attempt searching out her secret by comparison of notes anent her farewell to each, the rector and Mary Dacie could only join voices in regret that she was gone. That Mrs. Alwyn's sudden adieux were connected with

the earlier ones of her daughter many might suspect, but none knew certainly. The Comynghams preserved a prudent silence. People in general soon tired of speculating on what might never be confirmed. Sydney's mother and sister passed out of mind with a speed that unflatteringly matched their bodily removal, and it was but herself who was lamented long by Patty Peggs, and others of her kind and condition.

But even the poor folks ceased to pester the doctor's daughter with questions about her friend and theirs when they found she knew as little as themselves, and Mary named her now to few, since it was a pang to confess ignorance of one whom she missed more sorely every day. For that ugly presence, 'genteel poverty,' was asserting itself more obtrusively than ever at the Gate House as the warm weeks

rolled by. Paying patients sidled off to the active young Edinburgh M.D., who diagnosed simple maladies in the mysterious phraseology of science, drove a tall vehicle, with a boy in buttons at his side, and literally, as well as figuratively, soon left his old-fashioned rival far behind in the race to heal. Punch, the Dacies' old cob, having expired through over-exertion in a night gallop to a pauper invalid, and his place, for want of funds, being left vacant still, the old doctor limped about afoot among the few who still required his attendance. If wanted—rarely enough—far afield, a neighbouring baker supplied a steed on consideration of his wife being physicked gratis. All the shifts the household had endured cheerfully so many years barely sufficed now to preserve a decent professional front. And the cheerfulness grew grievously difficult; Mrs. Dacie

fretted for her husband. He, a true old Darby, worried for his Joan. Those few years of rest that the animal part of humanity so longs for ere it falls finally asleep, seemed likely to be denied these two, and Mary sorrowed silently for them both. Ah, if Sydney had been there now, with her bright fearless power of lifting them out of their troubles, her happy insistence, baseless though it might seem, that there were better times coming, what a ray of gladness she would have been among their dark domestic clouds! How Mary could have solaced her own tormented nerves on that lost companion's trustful buoyancy, and, oh, what a rest it would have been!

But that source of sympathy was inaccessible. Even a letter was impracticable, for Mrs. Alwyn, when forwarding Sydney's last tender but sadly uncom-

municative little note to Miss Dacie from Zurich, had by accident or design omitted to enclose her own address, and thereby cut off response for a time at least. So, alone with her grinding daily anxieties, Mary spent July and August unable to get much of their sunniness into her own system, since all their fair gifts seemed besmirched with ever-present cares, a file of unpaid bills tormented her week in, week out, and the very roses on the house walls seemed to shake their fragrant heads at her, and say, reproachfully, 'Now, don't presume to enjoy the sight of us, Miss Marry! If you must think of something sweet, think of all those groceries you owe for, and find a way to settle Mr. Tabor's account, do!'

Over the road to that desirable end she puzzled, till two upright puckers established themselves permanently between her brown

eyebrows, and not till nearly Michaelmas did the faintest solution of the difficulty present itself. Then it was only of the stop-gap description, but, being better than none, she stifled qualms over it, and adopted the device which till now story-books only had made her acquainted with.

It happened that one September afternoon a stranger to Hemynford arrived there by rail, and going through the principal street drew out his watch by the post-office, to see if his and local time tallied. It was just five o'clock, a fact proclaimed additionally by an outrush from a building hard by of National School boys. one of whom, with a joyful yelp of freedom, backed on the traveller's elbow, jerked the watch on to a valise in the opposite hand, and smashed the crystal face to fragments. Before the owner understood the accident, its originator had bolted, so nothing re-

mained but to look up a shop where the damage might be repaired. Some score of yards off, gilt letters on a shop-door blazoned forth that 'W. D. Samuels' had for fifty years traded at that spot as goldsmith, optician, etc., and smaller type made known that old gold or silver could be there purchased or taken in exchange. Here the stranger entered, and handed his watch over the counter for treatment, announcing that he would wait while a new glass was put in.

'That,' said Mr. Samuels, screwing his trade badge into one sharp eye, and examining the dial carefully, 'wouldn't take me two minutes, sir; but I'm sorry to say the rim is injured. I can't put that right under a day. You—see, sir?'

The gentleman did see, with considerable disgust. The injured chattel was an old favourite. The notion of trusting it to an

unknown tradesman was unpalatable. He hesitated, mentally objurgating the little rascal who caused him the annoyance, then made up his mind.

'I'll have it attended to in town,' he said. 'Just put it up in a box for me; and have you any silver concern—second-hand will do—that will keep time the few days I'm down here?'

Mr. Samuels' *amour propre*, ruffled at the first sentence, was smoothed at the second. He had many of the articles requested in stock. Might he trouble the gentleman to step behind his desk. Here were fifty hanging up, extraordinarily reasonable, from which he could make choice. So round the tall rail-topped desk went the customer, and was there enduring Mr. Samuel's alternate eulogiums upon an ancient specimen of the turnip tribe and a superfine flowered-back Geneva, when

another individual entered the shop; and, with a muttered 'Excuse me, sir,' Mr. Samuels returned to his counter.

The new comer was a lady this time, and her business not to buy, but to sell. To Mr. Samuels's credit, be it said, however, this in no way lessened his civility. On the contrary, he was politeness itself; but he spread courtesy as soft as down over a bargain as hard as adamant. No one could be sorrier than he that levers of this class had gone out of use, and reduced the watch, nervously submitted him, to just the worth of the gold in its case. And no doubt it did seem strange to anyone not in the trade, that chains should drop to a quarter their first value after less than twenty years' wear. But that was the unfortunate truth. 'He hadn't made it, and he couldn't mend it, or he was sure, to oblige Miss Dacie, he

would. And these seals? Oh, out of date; only fit for melting! A spade guinea? Well, for *her*, he'd risk a sovereign on that. And a ring? Diamonds?' (The old dealer's eyes would have glistened if long habit had not made him careful.) 'Why, it was sparkling, no doubt, and' —twisting it on the end of his thick thumb—'good; but the stones—oh, they were small, and the setting antiquated.'

'It was a great-aunt's; she left it to me, and the watch, too,' poor Mary Dacie faltered. 'We always thought them valuable.'

'And they are,' agreed ready Mr. Samuels, 'very—valuable, indeed, from a-a-association; but as a matter of business I couldn't give more for the lot, Miss Dacie, than——'

Than about a third of what she had humbly hoped! Pained chagrin nearly

unhinged her. But, if she turned back from the half-completed ordeal, those wretched bills would gall her worse than ever. So she did her best to answer lightly, though all the shop looked blurred and misty for a minute.

'Then, if you can give no more, Mr. Samuels, I suppose I can get no more. I have another watch at home' (a school-girl treasure, price forty shillings sixteen years before), 'and I scarcely ever wear rings, so these are of little use to me. I must take what you offer. You *did* say guineas, did you not?'

Mr. Samuels had, indeed, used that magnificent term, but he fully intended slipping through the transaction in five per cent. lowlier form. But there was an anxiety about the question that over-rode his cupidity; also, he perceived that one of the seals was worth treble what he at

first suspected. So with an air of generosity he conceded the odd shillings, unlocked his cash-box, paid out the sum, and, with the sincere assurance that he should be pleased to do similar business with her at any time, bowed Miss Dacie forth. Five minutes later he, with a deeper reverence, let out the stranger, who had emerged from behind the desk as soon as the lady left.

'It's an odd thing, very,' said the old jeweller to himself, peeping after the gentleman as he strode off out of townwards. 'I don't know his face, nor his name, but I do know he's the right sort to deal with. Thirty per cent., with no waiting and no higgling, isn't to be sneezed at in these times!'

An hour after this episode Mr. Vaughan was roused from his coffee and the 'Virgil' that served as scholarly sauce to his plain

fare, by an unexpected guest, and got up to welcome Richard Drayton right heartily.

'Dropped from the clouds!' he cried. 'I'm glad enough to see you; but why this sudden appearance after months of never a line? Come—explain.'

'Work, sir, work,' said Mr. Drayton, giving up baggage and overcoat to the rectory housekeeper, and taking the seat and coffee his host pushed towards him. 'I think I may boast I've not passed a lazy day since I left you twelve months ago.'

'So! That sounds well. But'—when they were alone—'what has come of your labour? A certain person got out of my sight once for nigh twelve years, and came back no better off than when he set out. Eh?'

'True, sir, so far as cash goes; and I've not much more to show for my industry this time.'

'Ah!' The rector looked disappointed. He knew his old pupil a worthy, and would fain see him a successful man.

'But, unless I'm much mistaken, I shall have before long. I used to get chaffed abroad by men cleverer and bolder than myself for missing opportunities of fortune by waiting too long to make sure of my way; and the habit sticks, I suppose. I must make sure of good foundations before I set to building.'

'Well, then, let me hear about your foundations, Drayton;' on which invitation the younger man discussed with his old tutor the particular paths which had opened out since they met, seeming to disclose, at no great distance of time, means of property in comparison with which his inherited income was a mere bagatelle.

'So far for what is accomplished,' he

said, at the end of explanations, carefully followed by his host. 'Now for what is to come. Perhaps, sir, you will think it a bit romantic when I say I want to see that favourite Miss Alwyn of yours before I go any further.'

In a moment the rector's interested countenance grew troubled. How success and sorrow mixed themselves up in this life, to be sure!

'My dear fellow,' he said, in tones of vexation, 'I'm afraid I have bad news for you there. Miss Alwyn has left St. Clairs these three months.'

'Left! just when I wanted to tell—when I wanted her to say!—Now, by all that's unlucky, how I wish I had come earlier. Once more I've been too slow. But I can follow her wherever she is, for of course you know, sir?'

'No more than you do.'

Then, careful to avoid watching the signs of extreme disappointment on his hearer's face, the rector, as far as he felt at liberty, told of Sydney's good-bye to him, and the subsequent vacating of The Dale, finishing with:—

'So I fear, Drayton, here is a block in the good luck you had not calculated on.'

'But one that must be got over,' said the other, resolutely. 'Can you tell me, sir, where the Alwyns came from to St. Clairs; I might get their present whereabouts so.'

'I have not the slightest idea. I never heard their former home named.'

'Nor anything of their former life? Mr. Alwyn's profession or so forth?'

'Nothing whatever. It has struck me sometimes it was a subject purposely avoided.'

Mr. Drayton crumpled up his brows, and

for a minute thought intently. Then he asked :—

'And you've no clue to what took Miss Sydney away ?'

'Not the least. I only surmise, from the poor child's emotion, it was something delicate and painful. As she could not disclose it, I have no right to pry into it. Though, as for you—you haven't said in so many words why you want to see her, but, my dear Dick——'

'But I must find her somehow,' broke in Mr. Dick, abruptly. 'If you can't set me on my way, sir, I suppose no one at St. Clairs can ?'

'No one, unless Miss Dacie has heard of her since we last met.'

'Ah, I could ask *her*, couldn't I ?' said Mr. Drayton, with great alacrity. 'Mightn't I go to-night ?'

'At a quarter to ten ! Nay, that's past

canonical calling hours in the country. Wait till the morning.'

So till the morning Mr. Drayton was fain to curb his impatience, rewarding resolution by starting for the Gate House at nine o'clock next day.

Mary was working diligently in the garden, her conscience a little lighter for the thought of three receipted bills in her desk. She heard a step, looked up, saw who came, and had no time to flee into the house and hide a preposterous attack of shyness and her much faded cotton gown before he was by her side.

In trepidation worthy of a lass in her teens, she got her hand out of its huge leather glove and offered a disjointed greeting, enraged at her own awkwardness, though, as a matter of fact, with the sunshine on her yellow brown hair and a rising colour in her cheeks, she

looked younger than she had done for many a day, and, spite of the washed-out print, a gentlewoman comely and graceful still.

Perhaps this struck Mr. Drayton, for he shook hands with her warmly, and then, having picked up her rake and hoe, shook hands again, remarking that he would have come in the night before, but had arrived too late, so he took time by the forelock to-day.

'We—my father will be very pleased to see you,' said Mary, leading the way in with another blush. 'He was wondering last week if we should ever see you again.'

'See me! Why, of course you would. I wanted very much indeed to get here. For, Miss Dacie, I am so hoping you can tell me something of your friends at The Dale. Of Miss Alwyn especially.'

The bright colour left Mary's cheeks

with a chill rush. To hear of Sydney he had come. Only that!

'I can tell no more than that she is gone,' she said, thankful on such a theme she might be pardoned sadness.

'And you can't help grieving over it, can you?'

'Indeed, no!' turning her head away.

'And I'm sorry too. On your account,' —he was staring determinedly at her, but Mary kept her face invisible, 'and hers too, and my own'; I'd have given a good deal to have found her here. Can't you possibly do us all a good turn by putting me on the track to see her?'

'If I could I would, Mr. Drayton' (it cost something, that assertion!) 'but I have no knowledge of where she is.'

'Nor her mother?'

'Mrs. Alwyn was at Zurich a month ago.'

'Zurich. H'm. It will be a roundabout road if I have to trace her from there. But one or the other I must see. Propriety says *Mrs.* Alwyn. Preference says *Miss.* The lady mother and I seemed mutually repellent. While Miss Sydney,' —Mary swallowed a great heart-burning during that pause—'she would answer the question I have to put in a moment. You'll give me your good wishes to speed me to her, won't you, Miss Dacie?'

By good fortune in came the doctor and Mrs. Dacie just then. With a murmur of affirmation Mary escaped to the other end of the tidy, shabby room, and busied herself with mending, while the father and mother chatted with their caller.

Of course they had presently their say about the Alwyns, and Mrs. Dacie reiterated her belief that it was an affair

of the affections which drove Sydney away—'affection on the one side, Mr. Drayton, *not* hers! I'm confident our dear Sydney would choose differently. I'm not a conjuror, but I fancy I know where! Though, perhaps, that's hardly fair, is it?'

But the gentleman was deaf to these last words and their inuendo. Mary had just slipped quietly out of the room, and he expressed a hope that he had not interrupted Miss Dacie by coming so early.

'Oh, no, my daughter is not often long with us in the morning, unless,' said poor Mrs. Dacie, half-humbled, half-proud at the admission, 'unless we mean to go without our dinner! Don't frown at me, doctor dear! Mr. Drayton knows quite well we are not rich, and that Mary is a daughter-of-all-work!'

Possibly the doctor dreaded more domestic revelations, for hereat, with an apology, he said he must be starting on his round; it was not a long one, but it took him a good while to walk; and he explained, elaborately, to the visitor, who volunteered to go with him and lend him an arm, how Punch being defunct they had made up their minds, for various reasons, not to replace him at present. Between the lines of which Mr. Drayton read the truth pretty plainly, and had his deduction confirmed, when, the three-mile trudge over, they again neared the Gate House.

For Mary hastened to meet them, exclaiming,

'Oh, papa, have you seen the man from Oakleigh Place? No? Ah, then, he is gone on to Doctor McAndrew! You were wanted to attend the housekeeper. If only you had had poor Punch now, you would

have been back in time. Isn't it unlucky?'

'As usual!' said the poor old supplanted medicus, rather bitterly; and Mr. Drayton left them, to mature a fine design just planted in his brain.

He took another walk by himself that afternoon, and admitted its aim that evening to the rector.

'Your parish spreads so far, sir; you ought to have a good cob for the outlying parts. I looked out such an animal as would suit you to-day at the farm up the road, where you like the people.'

'Hammertons? Ay, they are good folks, and have excellent cattle. But, friend Richard, such a luxury means money; and I've not enough to spare for that. Besides, my exercise would never keep the creature in health.'

'Just so, sir. But there's Dr. Dacie killing himself, and losing his patients, for

want of a quadruped. Couldn't you and he keep a cob between you? I'll leave you to settle terms (without mentioning me though, please) but the fact is I've bought that brown nag of Hammerton's, and I want to get it into the Dacies' stable somehow. I know Miss Alwyn would have managed it. You won't refuse the office in her stead, will you, sir?'

So the upshot of that device was that a few hours after Mr. Drayton left St. Clairs next day ('I'd much rather have stayed longer,' he assured Mary; 'but I really do so want to find Miss Alwyn. I hope I shall return with her leave, and tell you what she and I had to talk about before long!') a serviceable steed was discovered crunching oats in Punch's manger, and for the present Mr. Vaughan had to carry off his share of the pious fraud as best he could, determining to make a clean breast

of the conspiracy the very next time Mr. Drayton came down.

But, though they all seemed vaguely to expect him soon, the year wore out without his reappearing. A note reached the Gate House early in October, saying,

'Dear Miss Dacie,

'Shortly after leaving St. Clairs I met the Major Villiers whom I had once seen there. By his assistance I was put in the way of obtaining information which I hinted at to you. Unfortunately, I have not had the pleasure of seeing Miss Alwyn at present. I thought you might be expecting to hear this, which is all I feel myself as yet free to communicate. Kindly accept my best regards, and believe me, very faithfully yours,

'Richard Drayton.'

Whatever did it mean? Had he,

through her former guardian, offered himself to Sydney and been rejected? *Impossible!* Was there to be a private engagement? Why, what for? And yet what else could this semi-confidence betoken? Mary read her note fifty times, surreptitiously cried over it; then, in a rage at her weakness, nearly burnt it. Relented, hid it in an innermost drawer, took it out and looked at it at night, and continually, with some reason maybe, called herself for her pains the very biggest goose, or any other emblem of absurdity, that ever stepped!

CHAPTER XI.

ROCKS AHEAD!

THE September evening when Sydney went back from Stillcote-Upton to Capel Moor, so grateful had she felt at the manifest desire for her return that she would willingly have taken double duties on herself for Jean Hurst or for her brother. But in one direction this impulse not only met no response, but was steadily repelled. A curious change came over Mr. Hurst's bearing towards her. He had been always grave, reserved, save when he warmed up to some subject under study, or on those

notable occasions when he talked with Sydney on their early morning and homeward walks together. Still there had been a brightening in all his aspects as the hours he evidently enjoyed came round, and Sydney's apt questionings and pertinent calls upon the wealth his splendid memory held, roused him unfailingly to cheerful activity, if not positively active cheerfulness.

Now this was altered. As unobtrusively but completely as when between eve and dawn myriads of silent snowflakes spread a white shroud over the living earth, so some spell was cast over these signs of reawakening interest in existence. The books begun before were finished certainly, and not a shade of his usual attention or thanks did Mr. Hurst remit. A chair would be always placed for his interpreter of pages, in warmth and light between

fire and window, though he, no longer seated near, would listen, shoulder up against the book-case, as far off as the room permitted. The volumes needed would be ready for Sydney, he trained his touch to that task without taxing Jean's assistance. Punctilious he grew that Miss Grey should not read on into the hour allotted to their midday walk. But the zest their occupation had seemed acquiring had somehow died down. When Sydney tried to win it back, reading her very best, her mind set keenly on her work, her reward was curious. Mr. Hurst would for two, or even three days break through routine, and betake himself to the riverside, leaving her mornings purposeless and void. And, if she halted to have knotty points disentangled, she was not answered at once by clear *viva voce* explanation, but referred, most politely but coldly, to

some authority among the tomes hard by.

Herein was something amiss, Sydney divined. The fervour of her helpfulness was damped. Wistfully she waited, hoping every day the cloud would go by. Forbidden by instinct as by position to seek the cause of the change, never had she felt so much the stranger in the strange land as now, and she was even thankful when Miss Hurst volunteered her private opinion on the matter, wide of the mark though it might be.

They were sitting, one October afternoon, in the drawing-room that looked east up the long moor, west on the yellowing trees across the river.

Sydney had used her undesired leisure to write a letter, which was to reach Mary Dacie viâ Paris, where Mrs. Alwyn sojourned, and now assisted Miss Jean to wind off links of Welsh wool, casting, from

time to time, a glance towards the orchard, where Mr. Hurst's tall form passed, and repassed, on the hither side of the fruit-bereft boughs.

Miss Hurst followed one glance, and smiled sagaciously.

'My brother is not quite so wedded to his beloved "ologies" as he was,' she observed, mild exultation in her tone. 'I thought it was a wonder if that incessant listening did not wear itself out soon. I must say I'm glad it has.'

'Oh, why?' Sydney could not forbear asking. 'You seemed so gratified that Mr. Hurst should get back to his old pursuits.'

'So I was. I thought it a very good thing, in moderation. But lately, Miss Grey, I was getting jealous. Not of you —oh, no, no!' laughing, for Sydney opened such an astonished pair of eyes—'Not

that, the least. But jealous of all those clever things I can't enter into. I was afraid he would get wrapped up in them, and presently grudge such a dunce as me any of his company. You see, Miss Grey, I have no one but him, now, to lean to. The more dependent on me he is, the more I feel him my very own. Whatever came between us, whether it was a person, or a thing, I couldn't help hating!' stopping to wipe away a tear.

'I don't think,' said Sydney, comfortingly, 'you need fear anything at all of that sort.'

'No? Well, I flatter myself, you are right, Miss Grey. You see how ready he is to get off his reading now, and you must be so glad of the rest, so'— not heeding a negative shake of the head— 'we are all satisfied! For,' moralised Miss Hurst, sagely, 'the very best of

books cannot completely satisfy a man's wants. No books, for instance, can talk to Gilbert as I can! And it's a great comfort to me, to find he realizes this. Have you not noticed lately, how much less he seems to care for "remains," and "roots," and goodness knows what stuff. And how often he'll turn the conversation to the apples or the weather, or something he knows I take an interest in. And have you observed how often he says, now, "Are you not coming to sit down, Jean? Don't be long away." Science and Art are all very well, but they're not a man's sister, Miss Grey. Honestly, I rejoice at poor, dear Gilbert finding out it is *me* he wants most of all!'

Not a syllable of this was Sydney able to gainsay, however intuition might question the self-satisfied ultimatum. So closer and closer did the spinster-lady hug her

happy idea, and never hesitated to strain this dependency of kinship to its very uttermost.

To wit.

An open letter lay on the breakfast-table one morning when Sydney came down. Miss Hurst had just ended reading it aloud. Her brother, with the unusual relaxation of anticipated pleasure on his features, was saying,

'It would be capital to have him here, Jean. You don't recollect much of his stay at our old home, but, if you had seen him with me at Pritchards when the verdict went against me, you'd like him as I do. And I promise you, he won't expect to be treated with ceremony. He will suit himself to our accommodation in a moment.'

Something unprecedented, a visitor, seemed impending. Less to Miss Hurst's satis-

faction, than her brother's, though. The lady, with an air of being much put upon, clattered the breakfast equipage, sighed noticeably, and then said, slowly,

'Oh, if you wish it so very, very much, Gilbert, pray have your friend. You ought not to be put off out of consideration for me.'

'Why, Jean, a night's lodging to my old chum won't put you out, will it?'

Another sigh, with a dejected smile at Sydney, that said, 'Oh, the denseness of male creatures!' Then an evasive, 'Oh, never mind; when do you want him to come, Gilbert?'

'Why, next Monday, according to what he says, is it not?'

'And this is Thursday. Then I'll go into the attic to-night, and give time for my room to be got ready.'

'Jean, you shall do nothing of the sort.

I could change, or anything will do for—'

Miss Hurst interrupted with sad severity. 'No, Gilbert, you know I should never suffer *you* to move. And "anything" will not do for a guest. But leave it to me. As you are so anxious to have him, make your mind easy. Everything shall be ready.'

Another mournful inspiration temporarily closed the topic. But at the dinner-table it was revived.

'On your visitor's account we dine later on Monday, Gilbert.'

'There's no necessity, Jean.'

'Oh, but there is. We dined at half-past six when he was with us at the dear old rectory. I shouldn't like him to consider that we've, as it were, gone down; though,'—to Sydney—'as I told you before, late dinners, as a rule, require more experienced servants than I can afford. But I

can help all the morning, and we'll make the effort for once. Oh, and should you consider, Gilbert, my orchard-trees want pruning this month, or shall I put it off till January?'

'I'm not wise on such matters,' confessed Mr. Hurst. 'Suppose you ask Davis.'

'Oh, *he's* certain to say, "Do it directly," because he likes getting here to work. But, you see, if we are to have this Mr.——'

'Now, Jean,' protested her brother, with wonderful good nature, 'don't try to make me believe a solitary man stopping here a single night can possibly interfere with your tree-pruning.'

'But, Gilbert, it does!' cried Miss Hurst, sharply, 'and I'll show you how. You are as unimaginative as Rebecca. She was telling me this morning we had

mice, and that we must have a cat to kill them. "A cat," said I, "Rebecca! a trap, you mean. *They* are the things for mice. A trap doesn't break plates: a trap doesn't jump up the larder shelf and steal the fish: a trap doesn't run away with one's young chickens, nor require a penny-worth of milk to drink every day. A penny a day comes to thirty shillings and fivepence in a year, Rebecca," I said, "and if I waste it so I shall not have it to spare for other objects. We'll have no cat!" And just the same, Gilbert, with receiving company. I can't do that *and* prune the orchard. For before I have a stranger here I must get'—docketing each article off on her fingers—'a new door-scraper; fresh carpet on the landing; a new lid to the soup tureen—I shouldn't cut off a friend, who was *such* a friend that he could even go through that trying work at the

oculist's with my poor brother, without soup!—and to get these things I must journey to Hereford. Also we should be compelled to have the front garden done up. All of which would take more than—'

Mr. Hurst just lifted his hand as if deprecating this torrent of items.

'I understand,' he said, 'we'll settle this presently, Jean. I am apt to forget how much you have to think of.'

Something in his manner silenced Miss Hurst's loquacious outpour. She looked at him askance:

'You will have some more beans, Gilbert?'

'No more, thanks, Jean.'

'Oh, but they are the last this season. I have not touched them myself on purpose that you should have them.'

'Good Jean,' he answered, but pushed aside his plate, and Miss Hurst ate up

what he refused, with the air of a victim to masculine caprice.

It was dusk that afternoon when Sydney, lamp in hand, came down from her own room, and heard herself softly called from the door of the study. Mr. Hurst had been there alone for the last hour. Now she found out what for.

'Have you a light?' he asked (those everyday admissions of his loss always smote her afresh with pain). 'Then will you come here? Have I not been doing mischief? I caught my arm on the inkstand, and I expect I have undone my afternoon's labour.'

True enough, an inky pool was spreading rapidly over the blotting pad, but, as yet, it was a good inch off the written page lying thereon. Sydney moved this hastily.

'Your letter is safe. The envelope——?

Oh, that you are holding. I can soon put the things straight and rub the ink marks off the table.'

'Has it hurt the carpet, or spoilt anything?' he asked, anxiously. 'Clumsy that I am. I don't want to damage the least of my poor sister's household goods.'

'You have done no harm, and there is not a speck on your letter. Here it is.'

But he drew back as she approached with it, asking, with a hesitation that struck her as most sad,

'Will you look it through for me? I am forced to come to—you. It is my first production without help. Is it legible?'

'Perfectly!' But the penmanship of such elaborate pains was so different, in its careful distances and angles, from the freely-written manuscripts of his days of light, that her one word betrayed com-

miseration. Mr. Hurst mistrusted her.

'If readable,' he said, 'will you let me hear it, please. There is no secret in it.'

So bidden, she read:

'Dear old fellow. Best thanks for your note. As for the enquiry therein, your informant was right. We long ago parted with all interest in the concern you name. Unlucky for us we ever had any in it. Whatever you are after, I wish you prosperity. I am not such a curmudgeon as to grudge my old college-mate good luck, though I seem out of the running. I should hugely enjoy a chat with you, but just now a visit would not suit my excellent "powers that be." Therefore I cannot say "come." That I will do so, as soon as ever I can, you very well know. Till then, or till I manage my pen better in the dark, fare you well. Always, dear Drayton——'

'Drayton!' exclaimed Sydney, with a great start.

'Yes, D-r-a-y-t-o-n. Have I not put it plain? Richard Drayton, he is: the fellow who chummed with me at Wellborough and Oxford, and won many a lecture, and, for all that, the hearty good liking of our dear old tutor, Vaughan. Ah, me, but those were good times! *Is* the name right?'

'Yes! I—I see now. Shall I fold it for you?'

She put the missive in its cover, read the superscription to her last year's acquaintance, now no further away than Worcester, checked all thanks, kept mute watch over Mr. Hurst, till very quietly, out by the side entrance, he went off with his letter—all this she did as if, awake, she were fulfilling a dream, completely for a space overcome by this strange coincidence of being sent by Fate to minister to that sad-

dened life she had felt so drawn toward, because described as 'well-nigh helpless, well-nigh hopeless.'

Pondering this added perplexity to her situation, mechanically she cleared away all signs of Mr. Hurst's disaster, replaced the blotting-paper from her store (she would not have Mr. Hurst worried over that!) and then went out into the soft twilight, to let a blusterous south wind aid in clearing away the new complication.

At first it seemed great. Must she leave Wynstone, for fear of Mr. Drayton's ever coming? Did her promise to her mother exact such extreme caution? Oh, surely not. Surely, as she was doing no harm, she might stay. She ought. She would! A pain seemed lifted off her heart, when she decided thus. For awhile, at any rate, she need not go. With a long, tremulous breath of relief, she looked up and smiled

at the stars peeping down from behind the scurrying clouds, and then went back, gravely but gladly, into the house she was tying herself to by bonds beyond her present comprehension.

Mr. Hurst was home again, and in the fire-lit drawing-room, leaning on the back of his sister's chair.

'Where have you been?' Miss Hurst was saying. 'Out? Oh, Gilbert, you know it fidgets me to have you on the road after dark.'

'Why, Jean, it's the same as day to me.'

'But not to other people. You might be hurt, or run over. Don't you remember Cousin Priscilla's terrier got under a cart-wheel in the dusk, and had to be chloroformed, and put out of the way, and how she fretted over it? I should fret a deal more over you, so don't go out in the gloaming, please.'

'I'm a deal of trouble to you, Jean;' letting his hand fall on her shoulder.

'Well, well. Who minds?—*I* don't. You can't help it.'

A few seconds silence. Then, 'What I can help, I will. You won't be put out by Drayton, Jean. I have stopped his coming.'

'You have?' with animated relief. 'But,' compunctiously sliding her fingers into his, 'it vexes you to give him up? You are so dull here.'

'No, Jean. Not dull, with you—and—'

The gratified sister broke in with a purr of contentment. 'It is the greatest mercy left us, Gilbert, to think we are all in all to each other.'

And, in her unbounded satisfaction at this view, Miss Hurst was for weeks more tryingly demonstrative than ever, as caretaker, or indeed, proprietor of her disabled

brother, vaunting their unanimity down to life's most minor details.

'Oh, dear,' she cried, coming laughing in one evening near Christmas time, when Sydney was reading of the past year's politics to Mr. Hurst, 'did you hear me scolding Fanny in the hall just now? The silly girl was creeping in from the orchard with a bunch of mistletoe to hang up in the kitchen. "No, Fanny," said I, "none of that nonsense, if you please! I cannot allow you any such tricks; Mr. Hurst and I never dream of such absurdities." Mistletoe indeed! Ah, Gilbert, we've forgotten such things, have we not?'

Her seniority might have prompted the speech; but it was an awkward one. Mr. Hurst took it in dead silence. Sydney, on whose lips since her father died, nothing tenderer had lain than Mary Dacie's kiss,

felt her cheeks suddenly aflame; the more needless those blushes, the more they burnt. Happily they faded unmarked, while Miss Hurst hunted up her woolwork. But the vivid colour would often now fly to Sydney's face, out of somewhat indignant sympathy. For poor Miss Jean's determination to level her brother to her own standard, grew more and more aggressive. He must live and move according to her solicitous rule; be pleased with her great self-denying skill in providing him gentlemanly fare and habiliments out of her narrow income; never feel or exhibit other desire than to vegetate placidly under her sisterly code. And how such a man endured this life Sydney, with eyes open to the capacities of each, marvelled more every day.

Marvelled! Till she recognised in this pathetic submission to the affectionate, fid-

getting feminine despot the culture of something superior to intellect, and realised each time she saw him harrassed yet uncomplaining, wounded yet not outwardly wincing, that the deepest force of his strong manhood was under more powerful control than that of either mere moral or physical mastership. All of which knowledge carried her on to very dangerous regions!

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME

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